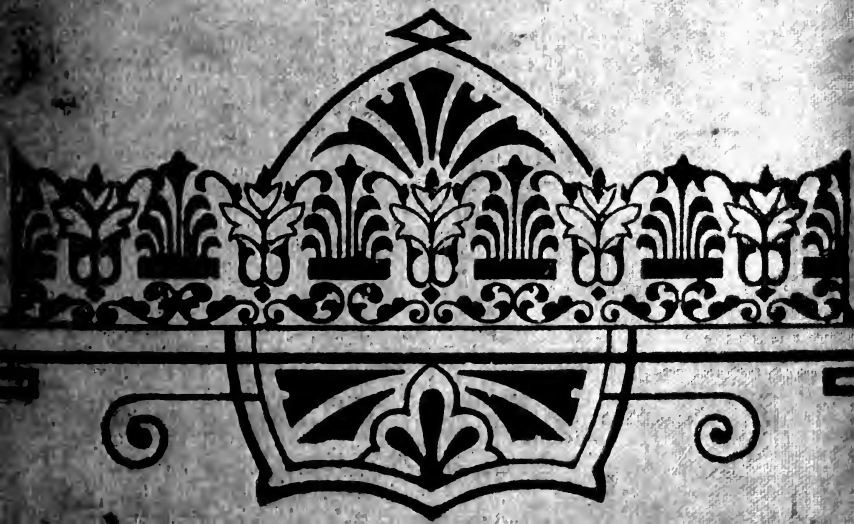




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BY

HELEN F. HETHERINGTON

AND

REV. H. DARWIN BURTON

AUTHORS OF "PAUL NUGENT, MATERIALIST," "NO COMPROMISE,"
ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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VOLUME III.

CHAPTER I.

DANGER IN THE AIR.

“Now what does c-a-t spell?” Madge, trying to divest herself of her own anxieties for a space, asked the time-honoured question to which thousands of children have had to answer during the growth of the English nation, seated in Mrs. Schonk’s front parlour; and Jess, arrayed in the dingy brown garment to which Mrs. Lewis had objected, promptly responded “Cat.”

“Good child, you shall begin words of four letters next,” Madge said approvingly.

During her loneliness she had been very diligent in these lessons, which she had begun long ago, and truth to tell, rather neglected when more pleasantly occupied. Now she found in them a great consolation, and took a deep interest in the child's ripening intelligence. Jess was very quick at learning, and as she soon discovered that the lessons brought Mrs. Manners more often to the house than she otherwise would have come, she made a point of doing her very best to please her.

Mrs. Schonk, grim and repellent, was always in the room with the baby on her lap or by her side, but she could not destroy the charm of Madge's sweet presence; and Jess looked forward to these visits just as keenly as poor hungry Ruth used to look for her meals. There was no opportunity for any confidences between the two, with that stern sentinel sitting there with watchful eyes and ears, but, at least, it was a time of freedom from heavy drudgery, and it was refreshing to look into a pretty face, and to listen to a gentle voice.

"And then, when your mother comes to see you again, you will quite astonish her by reading out a whole line," Madge went on cheerfully.

An instant change came over the child's bright face, the corners of her mouth drooped, her blue eyes dimmed with tears. "Mummy never comes now," she said ruefully.

"No, that she doesn't," broke in the strident voice of Mrs. Schonk as she put the baby on the floor, and watched its attempts at crawling without the shadow of a smile on her stern face. "She aint been here for near upon two months, and she hasn't sent a penny for Jess's board for ever so long; and I did think she was a honest trustworthy lady as ever stepped."

Madge instinctively drew the small form close to her, as if to give her the shelter and comfort she was robbed of by the absence of her mother. "Perhaps she has been out of England. I am sure she will come back, and send the money; she must love this little darling so very much."

"Oh, I knows their ways by this time," the woman said scornfully. "Awfully fond for a few months, or even years, and then perhaps another turns up, or this one becomes a drag, and then the child may go to the devil for all they care, so long as they don't have to pay for it."

"Those must be wicked, unnatural mothers, not like yours, dear," Madge said soothingly, as she saw a frightened look gradually creeping over the brave little face. "Be sure she will come back to you, and love you more than ever."

"Oh, if she doesn't, I must go to her," Jess cried, the longing in her heart so great that it gave her back some of her old independence. "Where is she—tell me where," clinging to Madge's sleeve. "I can't, and I won't 'tay here to be forgot."

"You won't be forgotten, darling, I promise you," lifting her on to her lap, and pressing warm kisses on her yellow head.

"Just you be after running away again," Mrs. Schonk interposed wrathfully, "and

mother or no mother, you shall have such a hiding as you won't forget in a hurry."

"No, no, no!" exclaimed Madge in horrified protest, gathering the child still closer to her heart. "She is such a little wee thing, you could not dare to hurt her."

A short, harsh laugh rang through the room.

"Bless you, ma'am, Jess knows me well enough. No child of my own could have been treated kinder or more 'andsomely than that one, who, pretty as she is, and a lady as you can see (I keep her fine clothes locked up), is sure to be no more than any other workhouse brat before the year's out."

"What do you mean?" her large grey eyes fixed on the woman's face, dilated with horror, at the thought of that lovely, refined-looking child being thrown amongst the rough waifs and strays of poverty and vice, to be coarsened and hardened, or crushed and broken-hearted, just as the lot might fall. The impulse was strong upon her to offer at once to take her to the warm shelter of her loving heart, and the safety

of her home ; but in spite of her dangerous habit of acting on the thought of the moment, she managed to keep the words back, though they actually trembled on her tongue. She could not but acknowledge that it was too grave a step to take without her husband's consent.

“I mean in plain English that I don't see why I should waste my money on a child that doesn't belong to me,” her thin lips going into a straight, relentless line. “And so, if her mother don't turn up, Jess, who's that puffed up with her own importance, and don't think this respectable house half good enough for her Highness, will just become nothing more nor less than a workhouse brat.” There was a snug complacency about the woman, as she wound up with this comforting conclusion, that irritated Mrs. Manners almost beyond endurance.

“What that?” inquired the child with a startled look in her eyes, instinctively guessing that it was something disagreeable. “Me won't be ‘workusbat.’ Horrid name!

"Me Jessie Douglas Lewis!" proudly, as if it were an imperial title at least.

"Jessie Douglas Lewis," repeated Madge thoughtfully. What did the name of "Douglas" remind her of? She could not think. She seemed to have seen it written in a masculine hand somewhere.

"Jessie fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Mrs. Schonk contemptuously. "Who knows what the minx's real name is, a little cast-off as she turns out."

Madge rose from her seat, and looked at her with a grave dignity which had its effect even on the woman's stubborn nature.

"I don't believe she will ever be cast off," she said slowly, as she laid her white hand on the child's golden hair. "So long as I live, she will never be without a friend, and as soon as my husband comes back, I will try and get her into a comfortable home. There are numbers of them for lonely little darlings," her voice softening as she looked from the hard face of the woman to the eager, innocent one of the child.

"Much obliged to you, mum," Mrs. Schonk said, but there was an utter absence of gratitude in her tone. "I don't give up that child to any institootion, so long as I can keep this place together. I only let on about the workhouse in case of need, so that there should be no rumpus if the time came."

"The time must never come," Madge said firmly. She was just going to add, "And as to money, if that has failed, I shall be delighted to defray the cost of her board," when she reminded herself that if she took the expense of the child into her own hands, she would certainly take her corporeally out of Mrs. Schonk's.

The child clung to her skirt, and begged her not to go, as she stepped out into the garden; but she knew that it would not be wise to try Mrs. Schonk's patience any further by prolonging her stay, so she pulled the tiny hands gently away, saying to console her, "I'll come back very soon!"

"Velly soon means to-morrow," Jess said

with a nod, as if imparting valuable information.

"Not to-morrow, dear, but next week," Madge corrected, with a glance towards the substantial form standing in the pathway, always on guard. "Mind you learn your lesson very carefully."

"Yes, when I've done the oder jobs," with a profound sigh, as if they were a ton-weight on her mind.

Madge laughed as she turned away, for it seemed such an absurd thing for such a mite to talk of "jobs"; but that laugh would have died on her lips, if she had looked over the fence half an hour later, and seen that same small child dragging a heavy pail of coals to the back-door.

Dr. Ford saw it, as he rode by, and cursed the woman for her cruelty. Why the —— didn't she use her own masculine strength instead of the child's weakness? He got halfway to the White House, but the thought of what he had seen worried him every inch of the road. It would not let him rest, but stung him

like a wasp. What would Miss Fitzroy tell him to do? Oh, he knew just as well as if he could hear her say the words in her clear, ringing voice. She would not go tamely home and hug herself in comfort by her fireside, like the "peace at any price" politicians of the day, who would abandon soldiers fighting for their country, rather than pay by loss of trade, or profit, for the needful expense of the work of rescue. At the sight of wrong to suffering weakness, she would raise up her voice, come whatever might. And so must he. There was no way out of it. He must go back and denounce that woman, or know himself to be the veriest coward in England. It was as if Violet took the bridle, and turned the horse's head.

Mrs. Schonk happened to come to the door, as he rode up to the gate. She greeted him with a smile, the smile that she reserved for him alone, and reproached him with being quite a stranger. Full of the subject which had brought him there,

he took no notice of her remark, but pointing with his whip to the child who had put down her load, and was passing her baby-hand across her flushed face, whilst her chest heaved with long-drawn breaths, said roughly, "Aren't you ashamed of letting that poor little beggar drag that heavy load? Why don't you carry it yourself? It's nothing for you—a strong woman like you, but it means death, or a crippled life for her. Don't let it happen again—or look out!"

The smile faded from Mrs. Schonk's face, whilst the pallor of deadly rage overspread it. She felt the rebuke like the cut, of a knife. It affected her, coming as it did from Patrick Ford, as nothing else could. A rage possessed her, a blind, unreasoning, vindictive rage. She thought of the great service she had rendered him seven years ago, and she brought it forward like the lash of a knout to make him writhe before her, in spite of his manhood. "It's well for you to talk to me of looking out, indeed!" she cried shrilly. "Let me tell

Mr. Patrick Ford that if he ventures to interfere with my business, I shall just venture to settle his, and that in less than no time. It will only take a drop of ink, and a sheet of paper, and the thing's done."

Having silenced the accuser as she supposed, she picked up the pail between her finger and thumb, to show how easily she could lift it if she chose, and with an insolent look over her shoulder, went into the house.

Dr. Ford called Jess to come to him, as an assertion of his own independence, but a strong arm was immediately thrust out of the window and the child hauled in over the sill like a sack of potatoes. He shook his riding-crop at the closed door and shouted a volley of scathing words, which relieved the tempest in his heart, like the lifting of the lid from a boiling pot, but did no more harm than pellets of bread. Then he rode on with a heavy frown, for he felt the first breath of the storm ahead—a storm which he knew would test his manhood to the core, and

show what stuff he was made of. He was in a corner, a very unpleasant corner, and the bravest man known to history might reasonably have funked it. He thought of a girl's fearless eyes, and he was afraid to be a coward; he remembered a girl's sweet kindness, and knew as sure as death itself that it would change into repulsion at the knowledge of his guilt; and then he was afraid to be brave. Dash it all! What mountains he was rearing out of mole-hills! Just because a woman without the instincts of a mother, or a hospital-nurse, put a child to a too heavy job, he had taken it for granted that the child was condemned to death. Just because danger to that little kid meant such an abysmal hole for himself, he was always scenting it in the air, or seeing it in the merest trifle. It had become a positive night-mare to him, and he must really put it out of his thoughts, or it would get the better of him, and deprive him of peace by day, and sleep at night. His Irish nature re-asserted itself, and

by the time he reached his home, he was whistling one of the cheeriest of his national melodies, as if there were no Mrs. Schonk in the world

CHAPTER II.

TUNING UP.

MISS GRENVILLE sat at the writing-table in her own private den, with the pre-occupied air popularly supposed to belong to a Cabinet Minister. It was the eve of the poling-day, and she was surrounded by cardboard boxes overflowing with orange-coloured rosettes. These were to have been distributed in all directions, but Mr. Templeton had sent up word that very evening, that he was afraid this might come under the head of bribery and corruption. Safer to sell than to give. She was needing Frank's help; and that "tiresome boy," as she called him, had taken it into his head that it was very good for the health of his brain to run down and get a mouthful of Devonshire air between the relaxation

of Saturday, and the tight clutch of business on Monday. It seemed to her that he was always running away when his presence in Letherleigh was most necessary. At one time, not so very long ago, if he were missing from the Park at an hour when he ought to have been there, she knew for a certainty that he was at the Priory. That was bad enough, and she had always objected to it, for she had been accustomed to consider Frank as her own property, in a cousinly way ; but, at least, the Priory had this advantage, it was near at hand, and she could send for him if she wanted him more than usual ; but it was a "far cry" to Devonshire, and though a wire could reach him quickly enough, he could not reach her till after many tedious hours of waiting, and to wait for anything under heaven was almost unbearable to Eva Grenville. How fast the weeks had flown, such busy and such happy weeks as she had never known before ! They had drawn her nearer and nearer to Godfrey Fane, and that had in itself given a richer tone

to existence. He had kept his successes for his committee, but his defeats and small annoyances he brought to her; which was the surest sign of his confidence. She had consoled him, and found a way out of them as best she could, and at least she had given him warmest sympathy and, whenever possible, bright words of hope. She forgot her vexation about Frank's absence, she forgot the lists of carriages which she had promised to write out, as she sat there with a pen in her idle hand, a smile on her rich red lips, and thought of Fane, contrasting him with all the other men she knew. He was infinitely better to look at than any of the rest, and he distanced them in every other way, she decided, with the strict impartiality of a girl towards her hero. Working with him she had found out that his mind was on a higher level than her own, for there was a nobility about his motives which widely surpassed hers, although the actions in which they resulted made no great show before the world. He could be arrogant as any

demagogue on a tub in Hyde Park, he could be obstinate as any mule when his driver has dropped the whip—she generously allowed as much as this, for she remembered that she always thought a girl a fool who imagined any man to be perfect ; but there was a large-mindedness about him which was so satisfactory, which admitted of no meanness or pettiness, which kept his temper unruffled even in a committee-room when he was being badgered by every busy-body in the place. He was trying to get into the House she was sure, not for the pleasure of writing M.P. after his surname, nor for the sake of adding to his importance, but, simply, because he wanted to lift up his voice in defence of the weak, and fight for the grand old Right in the face of hooting “please-the-people” Wrong. Oh, it was well to have such a man for a friend, a man who took a broader view of life than most, and never made “his own advantage” the boundary line of his horizon.

The pen was caught out of her hand,

and Frank, who had stolen up behind her without being heard, burst into a guffaw. "Well, you dreamer! five bob for your thoughts. They must be up to that, as they closed both your ears and your eyes."

"You wretched boy, how you startled me! Why weren't you here hours ago?"

"Because the train takes a certain time to get from down there to up here," with a jerk of his head supposed to be in the direction of Devonshire. "What do you want me for?"

"Heaps of things," she said comprehensively. "But tell me this," trying to fix him with her large eyes, "what is the attraction down there? Those Cranleigh girls! I remember you called them once as soft as a set of down-pillows."

"Thundering shame if I did," looking out of the window at the long rows of snowdrops like white-robed fairies in serried ranks, guarding the coming promise of the Spring. "They are too awfully good to me,—let me do any mortal thing I like. Went to a church miles away only yesterday,

and they never bothered me with a 'Why?' "

"But I will," with a laugh. "Why did you go there, sir? Couldn't you get through your devotions at Cranleigh?"

"Of course I could, but there's a jolly little church at F——," he said, with a lurking smile which was almost afraid to show itself about the corners of his mouth. "Splendid architecture — early English — quite a specimen."

"Never knew you had a taste for architecture before," Eva said, with a quietness that sounded dangerous, "except when father was adding to the stables."

Frank was silent, a circumstance which struck her as most alarming. Already he had gone into a dream, leaning against the window-frame, his body in that comfortable little den, his mind probably miles away in Devonshire.

"Have you been to see Mrs. Manners?" she asked, with malicious abruptness.

He started quite dramatically, to her great delight, and the colour rushed into

his face. "Mrs. Manners? No, that I didn't, I quite forgot her!"

"You forgot Madge? And the hours you used to spend at the Priory, the many times you were late for dinner, the fictions you used to make up about the trains!"

"Oh, shut up! I'm just as devoted as ever, only I've been mixed up with other people lately, and—and other things have shunted her for a moment out of the way. But how about Kinglake?" turning the subject with alacrity.

Kinglake was a man with opinions of his own—a fact that always grates upon the feelings of an ardent feminine canvasser—and he was consequently an object of intensest interest to Eva Grenville. Frank's vagaries went out of her head in a moment, and vanished entirely behind the figure of the recalcitrant voter. She threw herself into a discussion about him with her usual eagerness, mentioning various people who had tried their influence upon him without success; and Wood, in his earnest desire

to avoid any more personal attacks, talked as if Kinglake had been his one absorbing thought for the whole long journey up to London.

The two cousins were not left long alone, for Mr. Grenville came in, bringing with him Mr. Templeton and the Rector; and they were soon followed by Fane himself. Fane bent over the back of Eva's chair, looking down at the unfinished lists spread out on the table before her. Every now and then she had fancied herself neglected, or her services not sufficiently appreciated, but this evening he praised her in the most unstinted fashion. The sort of craze she had cherished for him ever since their first meeting had made her hypercritical as to every shade in his treatment of herself, and now she seemed to notice that he tried to disassociate her efforts from his own personality, and consider them as entirely due to her enthusiasm for the cause. He called her the most enthusiastic Conservative that he had ever known; but she very much doubted

whether her convictions were as sound as he imagined them to be. If Godfrey Fane had been on the other side, and Mr. Peregrine Courtman had personated the would-be Tory member for Mid Surrey, it is possible that she might have lectured herself into being neutral under great pressure from her political conscience, but it is certain that she would not have stirred a finger to add that particular unit to the Conservative party in the House.

"I have stolen up here to hear the news," Mr. Lindsay said with a twinkle in his eye ; " doesn't do to be seen in either of the committee-rooms, or I should be torn in pieces at the next vestry."

" But this is Mr. Fane's second committee-room." Eva looked over her shoulder to make the remark. " Here the privatest schemes are hatched, and the most telling squibs are born, and the most striking placards suggested."

" I would have suggested a half-starved baby ; that would have brought all the women over to our side."

“But why, Mr. Lindsay? The Liberals haven’t taken to starving babies, have they?” with a puzzled look in her eyes, and an instant regret in her mind that she had not added this inhuman crime to the long list of their enormities. What a power it would have given to Fane’s eloquence! There was a general laugh at this, and when it had subsided the Rector explained some of the hopes he had founded on Fane’s exertions in Parliament.

“Heard anything more of that woman Schonk?” Templeton asked as he picked up one of the rosettes, and inspected it critically.

“She has another baby in her hands, so the sooner we move the better.”

“My dear fellow, that baby, if it is allowed to live, may be an octogenarian before we achieve any results.”

“I don’t think it will, if I get a chance,” Fane put in quietly. “That tender-hearted little woman, Mrs. Manners, sha’n’t break her heart a second time if I can help it.”

Frank looked up quickly. "I didn't know that she had done so at first?" In spite of his quasi-desertion of her it nettled him that any man, especially Fane, should pretend to know more about her than he did. Like the generality of his sex, he was a dog-in-the-manger about his friends.

"No!" was the only answer made by Fane, with a wise reserve that Wood found intensely irritating. He was going to explode into an angry speech, when Osgood Lewin came in unannounced, and brought the news that every orange placard in the principal street had been covered up with a blue one. This created a diversion, and dark plans of reprisals were immediately concocted.

"Here, make yourself useful," Eva said hastily as she pushed a list of names towards him, and told him to copy it.

"Delighted," he rejoined readily enough, but his delight dwindled into sulky dissatisfaction, when he found that she only wanted to turn her work over to him in order to give her undivided attention to

Fane. Godfrey had never asked for his services, or wished to put his name on the long list of his committee, but Lewin had professed a great zeal for the cause, which gave him an excuse for often dropping in at the Park, and won him Miss Grenville's approbation.

Mr. Templeton watched the scene with cynical amusement. There was the Rector so absorbed in his grand ideas that he saw nothing that was going on within a few inches of his nose. There was Mr. Grenville, the anxious parent, entirely engrossed in the subject of horses to be supplied from his stables on the morrow, and perfectly unaware of the siege being laid to his daughter, by a man who had "scoundrel" written on every line of his face. Lewin's chances were nil if Fane came forward; the barrister was sharp enough to find that out; but if Fane chilled off, instead of warming up, Eva was just the sort of girl to do a mad thing, like the acceptance of Lewin, in an impulse of pride and pique. This election ought

to have done the business, but Fane was such a whimsical fellow you never knew what he was likely to shy at. Miss Grenville's friendship for Lewin was the very thing to disgust him, and if once disgusted, he might admire, or even love, but he would never make her his wife.

"Stocks and shares, race-horses and dice-boxes—these will always be an easy way of going to the devil, which every fellow will find for himself," the Rector was saying gloomily, somebody having mentioned a sad case in the evening papers.

"I knew a woman who used to drive down every day of the week to some place near the Strand, where she watched the tapes as keenly as any man," the barrister said quietly.

"Did she make a good thing out of it?" Lewin asked quickly.

"Not exactly, there was a split. She is companion to a deaf old lady with a morose temper, whilst he amuses himself in the backwoods."

"He has infinitely the best of it, so he

needn't grumble," exclaimed Eva impatiently.

"Perhaps he had a predilection for his house in Park Lane?" suggested Templeton.

"Ah, yes! If I made my husband an Ishmael," slowly, "I should have to blow out my brains," with a shudder.

"No, you would have to go with him. Could you do it, do you think?" Fane asked as if he really wanted to know, and meant to judge her character by her answer.

"Do it? Of course I could," she said with her whole heart. "If I had deprived him of everything, I'd have been his slave."

"Then don't gamble any more, for the *rôle* of a slave wouldn't suit you," with a smile.

"I don't think I will. I'll be just as good as Madge Manners."

"You couldn't have a better model," he said warmly—too warmly she was disposed to think; and then Lindsay and Temple-

ton carried him off, for there was much business to settle in the committee-room. Many ardent supporters were waiting at the door, who pounced upon Fane directly he appeared ; but the Rector went away to do some parish work.

CHAPTER III.

“WARE HIM!”

“AWFULLY obliged to you,” the Duke of Edenbridge said, as he took up his silver-headed cane and prepared to depart. “I’ll speak to Stormont about it, and let you know as soon as I can.”

“You’ll do nothing of the kind,” Lewin responded promptly, for the name of the Duke’s man of business was as obnoxious to him as that of a detective to a dynamitard. “We don’t want any confounded lawyers poking their noses into this affair. Not that we are in the least afraid of them, but you know as well as I do what a business they are sure to make of it, just for the purpose of sending you in a long bill, and showing their infernal activity. There are the shares—take them or leave

them—White has given you this chance at my special request ; but if you like to chuck it up, it's nothing to me.”

A grave expression came into the younger man's weak, but good-looking, face. He had come to Dorrien White's office in Arundel Street at Lewin's request, but rather against his own wishes. He had singed his fingers so often already when airing his independence, that he had resolved to depend upon his lawyer's advice for the future. This was the only sensible course to pursue, but he was sneered out of it, as he knew he would be, for a sneer was more powerful with him than pounds of good advice. Lewin wanted to know when he was going to be a man, shake himself free from those old women in Lincoln's Inn Square, and act for himself ; and in his hurry to show that he was a man, he proved that he was a fool, and put his name down for a number of shares in the Nanomana diamond mines. Lewin still pretended only to be acting as a friend of Dorrien White's, “who had been called

away on important business, and who had allowed him to make this appointment with the Duke in his private office for the sake of their mutual convenience." As he wrote down a note of the transaction, his eyes glittered with triumphant cunning. Before he had done with him, "the young idiot," as he called him in the privacy of his own mind, should pay him dearly at the rate of fifty per cent. at least, for that ten pounds which he had lost at Epsom.

"Are you head boss of this concern?" the Duke asked after a glance round the room, which was conspicuous for its elegant upholstery. The highly varnished writing-table, with its pigeon-holes at the top, and its brass-handled drawers down below, had a gimcrack pretence about it but no solidity; the Chippendale chairs looked as if they might collapse if a more than ordinarily obese individual ventured to sit down on them. The water-colours adorning the green walls, with their weak talent and their smart gilt frames, looked as if they had been hung up yesterday, and were

coming down to-morrow. It gave you the impression of a room on the stage, which might change into some other kind of room in the next five minutes, and the man who was sitting in the only workman-like chair might have got up himself for the villain of the piece, ready to play his part with false smiles and shifty eyes before vanishing into obscurity behind the scenes. Edenbridge was not an observant man, but the room as well as its occupant made a disagreeable impression on his mind as he asked his point-blank question.

"Head boss? No, I wish to goodness I were," Lewin rejoined with a harsh laugh. "I expect White makes a pretty penny out of it, but such pennies don't come my way, more's the pity."

"Not even the Co.?" he hazarded again.

"No such luck," looking away from the questioner, whose frank eyes were fixed upon his face.

"To be quite open with you,—but don't let this go any further—White is an old chum of mine, and I don't refuse to

give him a helping hand now and then. You see I go into rather better society than he does. I'm a cut above him, in fact."

"Humph," said the Duke, wondering to what level the unknown White had sunk, and thinking that there was nothing much lower than that of a society *tout*.

"You needn't be in such a hurry to go. Have a cigarette?" pushing a box of Egyptian Beauties across the table. "White seems to like this style of thing; I prefer something stronger. How are they all at the Castle?"

"My mother's in excellent condition, and all the rest. Do you remember, Miss Douglas, a pretty little shy thing, my sister's breaker-in?"

Remember her? The question roused Lewin to more than his accustomed alertness. "Yes," he said carelessly, making a seeming effort at remembrance, "a sort of Miss Nobody-Nowheres, a kind of automaton, who spoke when she was spoken to, and played—"

"Yes, yes," the other interrupted him hastily. "She is as good a girl as ever stepped. And I expect she's had very hard lines. However, she will soon be out of it—"

"What do you mean?" every pulse in his body quivering, but afraid of betraying too great an interest by asking another question.

"She's at death's door now, and my sisters are awfully cut up."

Lewin put up his hand to hide his face, which he felt had changed colour. The deliverance that he had longed for was coming to him, and yet the news seemed almost like a blow. In a few days he might be free, but, poor little thing! Edenbridge was right, it *was* hard lines on her—devilish hard lines after all. "What is it?" he asked, and cleared his throat loudly to take away its huskiness.

The Duke seemed to have a hazy idea as to what the malady was, something internal, and which had gone on some time. Fortunately Miss Douglas was a great

favourite with his mother, who grudged her nothing in the way of nursing and the best advice. There had been an operation, Emmeline said, and she had pulled through remarkably well, but she did not think she would recover.

Lewin gathered up every detail thirstily, but was so afraid of showing too much interest, that Edenbridge went away thinking him a cold-hearted brute, with no feeling for anyone but himself.

That very evening Osgood Lewin was engaged to dine and sleep at Letherleigh Park, and this news from Edenbridge Castle opened a vista of glorious possibilities before his excited eyes. For all he knew he might be a free man at that moment. Polly was always the frailest of mortals, looking as if a puff from a pair of bellows would blow her away. Hardy men as often as not sank under an operation, and she would be sure to slip the hooks, if it was only the cutting off of her little finger; and, therefore, she need enter no more into his calculations with regard to the future.

As to the past, she might have it all to herself; he made quite a fool of himself about her once, and he could feel quite affectionately sorry for her now. But Eva Grenville, Great Scot! to think of it! He might go in and try his luck, at least. He would begin that night, if he could get her to think of anything but this beastly election. He must be careful not to rouse the governor's suspicions. When she had once accepted him, Grenville might cut up as rough as he liked, but the girl was the apple of his eye, and he would never take his money away from her, and leave her to face poverty just to spite her husband. He wasn't that sort of chap at all, Lewin reflected comfortably, and if Eva would only have him, he would get the handsomest wife in creation, and all his debts paid off as well. He stood up, absently brushing his hat with his coat sleeve, when Harris, a short, broad-shouldered man with long whiskers and a foxy look in his eyes, came in through a door marked "Private." He gave his Co. a sharp look from under

a pair of bushy eye-brows, and inquired if "the swell had bled pretty freely?"

Lewin, annoyed at being brought down from dreamland to such sordid details, pushed the sheet of paper on which he had written the number of shares towards him, and said shortly, "You can see for yourself."

"I call it a beggarly lot for a duke," Harris exclaimed in gruff discontent, having formed the highest expectation from such an exalted member of the peerage.

"Do you? My experience of dukes is that they don't like parting with the ready any more than other people," sententiously.

"Then give me the city nob, with his hand as open as his eyes. I know how to take them; but as to these high-topping swells, when you do tackle 'em, you get precious little out of 'em. Five hundred pounds!" contemptuously. "I made sure that he was good for five thou."

"And how about the Bishop?" Lewin asked with a sneer; "a paltry fiver was all

you got out of him, though you baited the trap with the conversion of all the dusky inhabitants of the Ellice Islands, by the Christian miners sent out to Nanomana."

"No, he wouldn't swallow it," with a laugh, as he thought over that artful circular which had cost him such worlds of thought. "I knew too much about miners, you bet, only he needn't have been scared at ours; the harm or the good they do won't make much noise in the world," with a grin.

"No, but those confounded articles in *Veracity* will blow the whole concern, if we don't look out. We can't square the old scoundrel, so we had better get someone else to write us up."

"That's your line of business. I stick to the shop."

"Oh, bother! Everything's my line of business, whilst you sit here, smoking your head off."

"Just you leave me alone," grumpily. "You don't pay for my cigars."

"But someone does, and that uses up the funds."

"And who has a better right to them than me, I should like to know?" squaring his broad shoulders as he stood by the one solid chair. "I've got the whole thing up, and what with bullying and badgering, cringing and soft-soaping, I'm sick to death of it."

"You are not sick to death of pocketing the tin," sneered Lewin, who might have spoken for himself at the same time.

"Show me the man who is, and I'm dashed if he ain't fit for a lunatic asylum. Look here, Mr. Lewin," leaning on the back of the chair, and speaking with studied formality, "let us understand one another."

"Oh, hang it all; it's plain enough to see without spectacles," the Co. answered impatiently, "but I'm not going over it again. We stick together so long as it is for our mutual advantage; when that ceases, we part, and the sooner the better," he added to himself, as the brilliant future before him dazzled his common sense.

"Well, I give you fair warning, that

when this place gets too hot for me, I bolt without asking your leave."

"Bless your soul! I sha'n't ask you to stop," staring at him as if it were the greatest audacity on Harris's part to suppose that he could be wanted. "Go where, and when you like. Go to the devil."

"No, for you'd be cock-sure to follow me, and I shouldn't want you. No society *touts* needed down below." And with a grin of intense enjoyment at Lewin's manifest discomfiture, the "head boss" retreated into his sanctum, slamming the door behind him.

On leaving the office a few minutes before, Edenbridge had come upon Fane, who often was to be seen in Arundel Street, as Mr. Durward, his solicitor, had taken up his abode there. The Duke linked his arm in Godfrey's, and they walked together down the Strand in search of a hansom. Fane was fond of the boy, and frequently slipped in a word of good advice in the midst of a friendly chat,

wishing to keep him straight by the help of his own wider experience.

"What on earth took you to Dorrien White's?" he asked at once before they had reached the top of Arundel Street.

"A chap asked me to meet him there."

"Not Osgood Lewin by any chance?" quietly.

"The very man; but whatever put him into your head?" the Duke asked in surprise. "He doesn't belong to it, only the man's a pal of his, and he wanted to put me up to a good thing."

"He does belong to it, and the whole thing's an outrageous 'do.' Nanomana diamond mines isn't it? A new country, never been explored—diamonds to be picked up in handfuls."

"There was something of the kind in a circular, but Lewin knew better than to talk such rot to me," the boy said with a fine sense of his own acumen. "And after all, Fane, why should it be a fraud? I never heard of the Ellice Islands before. They

might grow diamonds as big as chestnuts for all I know."

"But I saw the man who went out there to plant our flag, and I asked him all about it."

"I believe you were going in for it yourself, you preacher of prudence!" with an amused smile.

"Not I, too old a bird to be caught with that sort of chaff. But I made inquiries for the sake of someone else."

"And you warned him off?" feeling that he would have liked that other man to be in the same risky position as himself.

"No, for I was all at sea, acting on a hypothesis like you are at this moment."

"What is your real opinion of Lewin?" the Duke asked on a sudden impulse; "I've known him for years, and yet—" hesitating.

"You haven't known him at all; on the contrary. Ware him as you would a fence with barbed wire. He would be sure to give you a fall, and that a nasty one," Fane said impressively. And then

they parted, the one getting into a hansom on his way to St. James's Street, whilst the other walked on to see an old chum at the Foreign Office. "I'd give something to know if Mrs. Manners had really gone in for it," Fane said to himself as he went under the archway in Downing Street.

CHAPTER IV.

GROWING DESPERATE.

EVA GRENVILLE, on the fifteenth of April, 189—, felt like Boadicea is sure to have felt when she had gained a victory by the strength of her will and the power of her own brave example—Boadicea, before she had met the Roman might, and dashed her proud head, and broken her passionate heart against that invulnerable rock. Fane had thanked her in the most delightful manner, declaring that he owed his victory to her inimitable proclivities for canvassing, which had far out-distanced those of any other member of his committee. It had been a very good time for her, and in spite of the fusses, the worries, the breaking of promises, the treacheries of so-called partisans, the very early starts, the

late comings-home, the irritating postponements, the inevitable disappointments, the carping of captious critics, the maddening luke-warmness of many, the lunatic zeal of a few, she had enjoyed herself thoroughly. Now it was all over, and she was standing in the dining-room looking at the long table to see if all its appointments had reached that point of perfection which she had insisted upon for this occasion, the congratulatory dinner to the new member. There was much to admire, and nothing to find fault with. Delicate glass intermixed with much shining silver, and here, there and everywhere, a net-work of golden daffodils and fairy fronds of hothouse ferns, for Nature herself was made to do homage in the shape of her spring flowers to Godfrey Fane. The grapes were tied with golden-coloured ribbons, a knot of the same was drawn through the corner of every menu-card, and, highest compliment of all, the hostess wore a golden brocade shimmering with sparkling jet, in which she looked like a modern empress instead of an

ancient British queen, whose courage in wearing her unbecoming garments would now be considered as great as her valour in facing the Romans. There was a light in her eyes, a slight flush on the softness of her cheeks, an expression about her red lips which became infinitely tender for one half minute, as a pleasant thought passed through her mind; the next moment she threw back her head like an impatient thoroughbred, and returned to the drawing-room, where her father greeted her with a playful bow. "Why, Poppin, you've outdone yourself to-night, Fane ought to be flattered!"

"Just as if I dressed myself for him, dad," she said, lifting her chin in grand disdain. "The Molyneuxs are coming to-night, and I want to take the shine out of that birth-proud arrogant wretch."

"Get yourself up in a dish-cloth, and you'll put her out as easily as a farthing dip," he said with the natural feelings of a proud papa.

Then the fond smile vanished from eyes and lips, for in they came—all the expected

guests, grave and gay, smart and dowdy, witty and dull, for to-day there was to be a general mixture of all the component parts which represented the Conservative party in or within reach of Letherleigh, and Eva had generously abandoned her usual power of selection. Fane as the hero of the evening was to take her into dinner, but when he was seated on her right hand, pleasant to look at, willing either to talk or to listen, what must she do but turn her white shoulder on him, and devote herself to the Rector, who wondered why he was made to bask in all the radiance of her smiles. Like a sensible man he took the goods the gods bestowed, and enjoyed them; well knowing that the good-looking man, with the proud, rather indifferent expression opposite to him was likely to have the share of a very Benjamin before the evening was over. Madge was taken in by a Mr. Molyneux, who was the husband of the Hon. Amelia, a masculine-looking woman with a slight beard on her ample chin, who was said to keep him in order when

out, because she was likely to give him a small amount of physical correction as soon as she got him safely at home, if his behaviour were not to her liking. He was now enjoying himself after his own favourite fashion, safe out of reach of his portly wife's basilisk eye. He considered this young Mrs. Manners to be an uncommonly pretty girl, and he thought it his duty to tell her so with his eyes, as well as with carefully prepared innuendoes. Madge laughed at him openly, but he only thought how lovely she looked when she smiled, for his conceit wrapped him about in the thickest of hides, and the more she laughed, the more amusing he considered himself to be. The talk of the rest of the party was all about the various incidents of the election, to Osgood Lewin's infinite disgust, for it made Fane the centre of interest, and as long as he was that, so long would Eva Grenville bestow her attention upon him, and leave Lewin himself out in the cold. Circumstances had thrown them more than ever together, but the *rap-*

prochement that followed was only due to the fact that she had identified herself with his interests, from a mere love of the fun and excitement inseparable from the feminine character. This was Lewin's version of the matter, or rather the version which he elaborated for himself, and tried to believe in. As Eva never threw him a glance or a word, he turned sulky, and at the same time forgot sentiment for sentiment's antithesis, business.

He was seated between Mrs. Lindsay, who liked him about as much as the rat who gnawed a hole in her fur-cloak, and who thought him just as dangerous, and a shy slip of a girl who had come out to her first dinner-party with the same feelings as a lamb would have if it knew it was to be roasted for somebody's dinner. Thus left to himself by the first, and not choosing to exert himself for the second, he took to watching Madge Manners. He was shrewd enough to see that her gaiety was forced, and though she was doing her best to join in the

bantering style of talk affected by Mr. Molyneux, her thoughts were far away. Once she met his eye, and as if the mere interchange of a glance had reminded her of some anxiety, her expression changed, a sudden sadness fell upon her, the corners of her mouth drooped, and evidently from the look of bewilderment on Molyneux's vapid face, she had answered him all astray. This was quite enough for Lewin, and like a sleuth-hound on a track, he followed her as soon as he could, when one or two of the men joined the ladies in the drawing-room. He found Madge looking out of a window with her nose close to the panes as if she were trying to get rid of the brightness of the room, in order to study the stars in the April sky. Oh the cool, calm peace of that starry heaven! Was there no sympathy to be found for the fear and the fever of her restless heart, no message of comfort in the hush of the night, when the birds were resting on the stirless boughs, and every predatory thing on

wings had ceased from its eager pursuit of prey? No—for the peace of half a world outside will have only a disturbing, irritating influence by its mere force of contrast, if there be wild unrest within.

She was all in white, as he had first seen her, and even he, who had small taste for her pure style of beauty, was struck by the charm of her womanliness as she turned her long neck, and looked up at him with a feverish appeal in her eyes. “Oh, Mr. Lewin,” she began, and there was a catch in her breath as she spoke, “you have got me into such a terrible hole, and I’m at my wits’ end what to do.”

“I’ll explain all about it,” he said, lowering his voice, “but for heaven’s sake don’t let anyone hear. Now what is the matter?”

“The matter is this,” she said constraining herself to speak slowly and very quietly, whilst her heart was throbbing with pain and bitterness, “I’ve had another

letter asking me for more, *more!* Oh, isn't it too maddening?"

"Is that all?" he said with studied coolness. "Well, it was only to be expected. How can you expect anyone to carry on business if you stop the supplies?"

"I meant to make money, you almost promised me that I should," there was a tremble in her lips, a downward look in her lashes as if there might be tears beneath, but she made a brave struggle for composure.

"And you will, I haven't a doubt of it." He looked straight down into her poor troubled face, and told his lie without the quivering of a nerve. "Only have patience, and if you wish to win a race, don't pull up before you've done half the course."

She looked away from him across the cheerful, brilliantly lighted room, and the bitterness of her soul rose up in a wave and nearly overmastered her. There was Eva talking to Fane, and looking as happy as

a child on her birthday, the Rector with a cheerful smile on his face, as he chatted with Mrs. Templeton, Mr. Grenville passing from one group to another with a pleasant word for all, as if to make up for the absorption of his daughter. They all looked as if they had not a care in the universe, whilst every trouble that had ever been since death and pain entered an unforgiven world seemed to be heaped on her own shrinking shoulders. If Frank Wood had been there, instead of running away down into Devonshire, as he always seemed to be doing now, whenever he could snatch a holiday, he would have been sure to be kind to her, and not have forgotten her existence as most of the others had done.

“Perhaps you will tell me that I am not to pull up till I have taken my husband’s last penny?” she said, with a sudden flash of anger ousting the sadness from her eyes.

“Not at all; you alarm yourself most unnecessarily,” in a soothing tone, which she found inexpressibly irritating. “The

smaller the sum you advance, the smaller the profits in the end. That is as incontrovertible as any problem in Euclid."

"I am beginning to be doubtful about those profits," she said slowly, as a cold shiver, like the first frost of despair, chilled the blood in her veins.

"Turn back now, and I should be very doubtful indeed," with a half sneer in his tone, as his impassive eyes rested on her troubled face.

"But how can I go on?" with a quick wild look of entreaty into his cold mask of a countenance.

"My husband will be coming home soon, I hope very soon, and good God! I shall be afraid to face him!"

She was growing agitated, and of all things he dreaded a scene.

"Afraid to face him!" he repeated with a short laugh. "Send a small sum, another fifty for instance, and see what Dorrien White will make of it. If I'm not very hideously mistaken, you will have something worth telling to Captain Man-

ners; and if he doesn't go down on his knees to thank you, I'd keep it all for myself."

"If I could be perfectly certain that this would be the very last," turning her face to the sky, as if to get an answer from those silent stars.

"Come, my dear Mrs. Manners, I thought you had more pluck," he said encouragingly.

"I've pluck enough, but—"

"But's a detestable word, it has ruined more strokes of luck than anything else in the world."

"But you can't wonder if I hesitate."

"I don't wonder at all," he said roughly, though his tone was low, "women always hesitate when they ought to act."

"I can't help it," with a frown of pain, "remember it is Hugh's money."

"I remember that husband and wife are one. Send me that note to-morrow, or you will very probably lose what you have already staked, and never gain a penny," and then he added in a whisper, "Hush!"

"Mrs. Manners, excuse me for interrupting you," and Godfrey Fane stood before her with an apologetic smile, "but Miss Grenville has been watching you, and she thinks you must want a chair."

"Very sweet of her," with the weariest of smiles, which seemed to justify the suggestion, "but I think I want my one-horse fly more than anything else. It seems so late."

"It is much too early. Why is it that you are the only one who has not had a kind word of congratulation for me this evening?" he asked as he studied her face with real anxiety.

Osgood Lewin slipped away, and seized his first chance of a word with his hostess; but one or two people had begun to talk of the long drive home, and consequently to ask for their carriages. And then, to make it worse, Mr. Molyneux discovered the charming girl whom he sat next to at dinner, and came up, twirling his moustaches, with his peculiarly vapid smile, and reproached her bitterly for having hidden herself.

“Really too bad, you know—fearful shame—left me puffeckly stranded. You live in London, I think—Mayfair or Belgravia? Say the word, and we may meet again,” with an ineffable smile.

Godfrey felt an irresistible longing to kick him. It was unendurable that Mrs. Manners should have to waste any words in answer to his nonsense, when the precious moments were flying, and this opportunity that he had almost forcibly secured was going from him. But there the man stood, oblivious of the fact that he was an interruption and a bore; and there he stayed, until in desperation Fane told him that his wife was looking for him. It was ludicrous to see how his self-assertion went from him, like a skin falling off, as he gave a frightened glance over his shoulder. And then Mrs. Manners' carriage was announced, and she stood up at once as if she were very glad to go. Eva remonstrated energetically, but gave way as she saw how tired she looked. Her eyes followed her as she went out of

the room, escorted by Mr. Grenville as well as Fane.

"Don't you think Mrs. Manners is very much changed?" she asked Lewin in a tone of alarm.

"Yes, perhaps so," he said jocularly. "She used to look over a fellow's head, and now she looks into his eyes. Effect of her husband's absence, I suppose."

"She is a mere ghost of herself," Eva said coldly, "but as you never knew her intimately, I suppose you don't notice it."

"This is the only house where I care to be intimate," he said with an attempt at softness.

"Then you must have a very narrow circle of friends. I am thankful to say mine is quite the reverse," and she moved away from him as if he jarred upon her nerves.

When Fane came back he found Eva the centre of a group of ladies, who were all talking eagerly, and with some excitement. They looked at him with meaning glances, and Eva asked him if he could guess what they were plotting.

He shrugged his shoulders, and asked what it was with his eyebrows.

"Will you do something to please us?" with a sidelong glance under her lashes, which meant that "me" was to be substituted for the more indefinite "us."

"Anything, only name it."

"Get Sir Adrian to give a ball at the Chase," her face glowing with eagerness. She saw a slight change come over his, but he answered readily :

"Ask him yourself, he couldn't refuse."

"Why should the uncle be so different from his nephew?"

"My uncle is a recluse. It is many years since he was teased or ill-used by women; he might have forgotten, he might take you for an angel."

"Mr. Fane, you are very rude," looking almost as if she were going to strike him with her fan.

"You would be disappointed if I weren't. But you shall have your ball," he said with a queer smile.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. SCHONK LETS HERSELF GO.

A FEW days later, Eva Grenville's eyes were gladdened by the sight of an invitation to a ball at the Chase. An old-fashioned card with no modern vagary of smart crest, or gilded monogram upon it, gave notice that Sir Adrian Fane would be "At home," on a date in the middle of May, about three weeks off. There was "dancing" in a corner of the card, which showed that something of the nature of a ball was intended; but there was no other name coupled with the baronet's, for the old man had declared that he was not going to fish up a feminine fifth cousin to do the honours, when Godfrey could manage it all just as well as any flighty thing that wore a petticoat.

This ball seemed to mark an epoch in her life. It was her ball, Fane himself had called it so. It was given to please her. With one sweep she did away with all those other women who had joined in the petition. It would be delicious to feel as she stepped out of the carriage and saw the stately rooms lighted up, and heard the strains of a frivolous band, and the chattering of a well-dressed crowd, where for many years silence and loneliness had reigned in unbroken dulness, that this revolution in the ways of the place was all for her, Eva Grenville, the manufacturer's daughter. Godfrey Fane would be sure to single her out in some marked way ; and she would hold her head as high as the bluest-blooded girl in the county. But when it was over, would he go back to town and forget her ? She felt there was a large portion of his life of which she knew nothing, a side to which she was a perfect stranger ; and this gave her the idea every now and then when she was low-spirited, that much as he might like her, he could very easily do without her.

But not to-day ; with that card in her hand, she felt equal to conquering the world. She feared no disappointment, she admitted no shadow of a creeping doubt. The brightest, sweetest hopes of girlhood were like sunbeams in her heart. She knew that she had beauty, and grace, and a quick intelligence, splendid health, and a substantial fortune ; but love far out-balanced them all, and all these things were as nothing to her compared with that one gift that Godfrey Fane might give her yet, or had given her already, who could tell ?

She would accept that invitation to Hyde Park Gardens, about which she had been hesitating, and when there, she would order the loveliest dress that could be conceived by the brain of either man or woman milliner, for what she fore-shadowed as the happiest evening of her cheerful young life. So off she went in the highest spirits, and flung herself into the busy crowd of London—to be admired, petted, and spoiled—to wait for rare visits from Fane, who, with the zeal of a new

recruit, was very attentive to his duties in the House—to have frequent meetings with Lewin, whose time was un-taxed either by society or Parliament, and whose inclinations, most powerful of all promoters of virile action, brought him to her side so often, that she began to miss him if he stayed away. She had not the smallest suspicion of the tie which sometimes made him stop dead short in a fervent protestation, and gave a sullen reserve to his manner. She drew him on, not guessing that she was doing devil's work with his soul, that the man was yielding, not inch by inch, but yard by yard, to the greatest temptation of his life, a temptation which was overmastering all scruples of a stifled conscience, and stopping his ears to the reproaches of that small remnant of "honour," soiled so early, and forgotten now, which is the *religion* of the world. Osgood Lewin had made a few feeble efforts at resistance; but now, seeing Eva so often, he lost his head, and let himself go. That other girl was dying, Edenbridge had said so,

she would be dead by the time he made his offer. A dead woman could have no claim on any man. Thank Heaven! the grave dissolved a marriage with a completeness that a good many people denied to the divorce-court. Mary could be as much out of the way as if she had never been born. And, poor soul (having in imagination already packed her safely under the sod, he could afford to be compassionate), she had had a hard time of it down here, and as she was a perfect pattern of prim virtue, she would get on much better with the angels than she ever did with ordinary men and women, so that it was positively humane to wish her to die. If the story ever came out, he could make it quite pathetic for himself. Everything depends on the point of view; and he could arrange that easily so as to satisfy a generous-minded girl like Eva Grenville.

So Lewin took advantage of Fane's preoccupation; and Eva, when she could not get the one she wanted more, put

up, as so many women do, with the one she wanted less, till his hopes waxed high as the Eiffel Tower, and he was only waiting for definite news from the Castle in order to propose.

Madge Manners meanwhile was living in a fever of unrest, never daring, during each long day, to look forward to the morrow. Not one penny had she received for all her large out-lay, and yet she was always being promised an abundant return. She was sure that the effect of her anxiety must be written in her face, for Mr. Lindsay stopped her in the road to ask if she were ill, and Mrs. Lindsay, evidently on a hint from her husband, took to dropping in with her basket of work under her arm, and begged permission to sit with her whilst she was mending her children's socks, as she never liked working alone. Madge knew this was only a kindly pretence, but she was sometimes glad of her cheerful, practical conversation to keep off the pressure of her thoughts. She also went more often to

see little Jess, as she became uneasy about her looks, but this did not all accord with Mrs. Schonk's wishes; and one day when she appeared as usual, lesson-book in hand, she was told that the doctor had given orders that all instruction should be given up for the present, as it was forcing the child's brain.

Madge expostulated, but with no more effect than the floods had which beat upon the ark. Indignant at what she felt sure was a bare-faced lie, concocted for the simple purpose of keeping her away, she penned a letter of inquiry, though rather alarmed at her own boldness, and presenting her compliments to Dr. Ford, begged to know if he had instructed Mrs. Schonk to forbid Jessie Lewis' lessons in reading, because of the damaging effect they would have on her brain. The answer came that same day, as if the doctor were in haste to exculpate himself. He presented his compliments in due form, and begged to assure Mrs. Manners that he was not in attendance on Jessie Lewis, and had

therefore given Mrs. Schonk no instructions concerning her. With an angry light in her eyes, Madge took the letter in her hand, and confronted Mrs. Schonk on the door-step of Rose Cottage. But if she had expected to see signs of shame and confusion in the woman's face, she was disappointed, for it was not the first time that she had told a lie for her own base advantage, and it certainly would not be the last.

"I never said it was Dr. Ford," she said coldly, though her indignation was hot within her. "I suppose he ain't the only doctor in the world. As it happens, Dr. Medway, a gentleman I knew years ago, was passing through the village, and he made a remark on the child, and said he thought she studied too much."

"She may work too much, I think that very likely," Madge said, as the colour flew to her cheeks, "but as to study, Jessie doesn't know what it means."

"Well, mum I know what I mean," stubbornly, "and that is that I can't get

a bit of work done for the sake of them books, so I mean to stop 'em. You ain't no godmother like you were to the other one, and you ain't got no call to come here."

"But for Jessie's sake, you will surely allow me?"

"Not for Jess's sake, or anybody else's," firmly. "My house is my own, and I want to keep it to myself."

"Of course the house is your own, but the child is not your own, and you have no right to make her grow up a dunce," with a firmness that equalled Mrs. Schonk's.

The woman's evil temper flamed from her eyes, and so possessed her, that Madge lost her usual restraining influence upon her. She turned upon her, and literally drove her from the house by the power of her tongue. It would have been a strange scene for any passer-by to witness from the road—the one, perfectly gentle and composed, with the self-control that comes from good-breeding, too proud to exchange a storm of words

with one so palpably beneath her, and yet retreating slowly to show that she was not in the least afraid, with her small head held high, and her sweet lips pressed closely together—the other, her handsome face ablaze, and yet deathly white, her evil nature leaping into wild revolt against all goodness, all piety, all regard for the God above, or the men around her—the knowledge of her own wickedness both in the cruel past, and in the loathsome plans for the future, goading her on—the consciousness of Madge's goodness, and pure unselfishness, and utter contrast to herself, acting upon her diseased mind as a stinging blister—she let herself go, as Lewin was doing under different circumstances. Taking hold of the gate with her powerful hand, which never yet had shaken with fear, and now was only trembling with the fury that burnt within her, she closed it with a force that made it weak on its hinges for a long time to come, and cried scornfully :

“Don't you trouble to come here again.

I never had nothing in common with a set of canting Pharisees, what minds other people's business, and never does their own. Go back to your long-faced parson, and don't come bothering a poor woman, who never asks nothing from the parish, and wouldn't demean herself to take it—not if it was thrown at her head."

Madge's slight figure was already at some distance, when these words were hurled after her. Mrs. Schonk stood with her hands on the gate, her broad breast heaving, her breath coming in gasps, her eyes still glittering, as if lit up by a flame inside. She had made a break with the cold impassiveness, the calm respectability of the past few years; she was no longer negative, but aggressively affirmative. She would go her way, and hold her own against them all. There was only one who could stop her if he would; but he wouldn't—no, he wouldn't, she was sure of that, for she had his reputation, his liberty even, in the grasp of her hand. He was bold as a hawk, but she could tame him

at a word ; and this consciousness of her power over him was a source of grim but triumphant satisfaction. He might gird against the task she would set him, as much, and as fiercely as he liked ; but, nevertheless, he would have to do it. She gave a short laugh, as she thought of his probable opposition ; it would last such a very short time, and was so certain to end in inevitable submission. She looked up and down the road, but there was no sign of his coming. She wished he would, because she was so ready for him—actually ready to be as merciless to him as she was to a defenceless child. But fortunately for Dr. Ford, he was miles away, attending a paralytic old man ; and as he sat by the patient's bedside, watch in hand, he was thinking of something pleasanter than the mysteries of Rose Cottage.

“ You impudent, God-forsaken brat ! ” She glared at the child as she spoke with positive hatred in her eyes, when she went back to the house, and found that Jess, with the independence that was natural

to her, had left off hemming the coarse cloth which had been given her for that purpose, and taken to the more fascinating employment of cutting a bit of paper into an odd shape, which she meant to represent a female figure. "You've got no mother, no kith or kin to bolster you up, and if you dares to go against my will, I'll break every bone in your skin before I've done with you."

"It's a lie—a lie. I've got a mother—lady said so," cried Jess, trying to free herself from the heavy grasp on her shoulder, and striking out with both her tiny fists.

Mrs. Schonk, with one swing of her arm, flung her to the other end of the small room; but, bruised and breathless, she lifted up her head fearlessly, and repeated with sublime defiance:

"It's a lie. Mummy 'on't fordet me," her blue eyes raised with the utmost pluck to the angry face above her.

It was wonderful that such a tiny thing should dare to brave a furious woman; and

her courage did more for the child than the meekest submission. Mrs. Schonk had a sort of respect for a spirit which in some ways resembled her own. The baby also created an opportune diversion by setting up a loud far-reaching howl, so she had only time to send a sullen curse at the golden-headed mite, whilst she turned to catch up the still smaller one, and give it a violent shake by way of improving its condition.

There was a quick step on the path, followed by a loud rat-tat on the door.

"Get along with you upstairs," Mrs. Schonk said in a hoarse whisper, and waited with her eyes fixed on the child's small form until it had vanished up the steep flight of stairs. Then with the baby still crying in her arms, she went to the door, and opened it for Mr. Orlando Smith, unconscious harbinger of destiny.

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That night she sat up later than usual, her insurance-book, which occupied the

same place in her mind as the Bible logically ought to in that of every Christian, lying on the table before her. No other book could have such a sinister influence on a child's life; for there was death, and the advantage of death written there between the lines, for all to understand. Mrs. Schonk found herself in an unpleasant position. Never expecting that Mrs. Lewis would desert Jess, she had flaunted the child's good looks before the eyes of the neighbourhood, and in consequence, many people took an interest in her. Ruth's hollow eyes and sunken cheeks had excited no comment, because he was carefully kept out of sight; but if she suddenly hid Jess up for week after week this could not fail to excite suspicion—and suspicion she most especially wished to avoid. There was another danger which she saw was imminent. The Rector and Mrs. Manners would start a benevolent scheme for placing Jess in some charitable institution. There was no excuse which she could fabricate for refusing to let her

go, when she had openly complained of the expense she was to her, now that her mother's supplies had failed. If Jess once went out of her hands, she might go on paying pennies for week after week, and year after year—and even die herself, before she touched the pounds which were waiting for her in no less than three offices. She leant her elbow on the table, her chin on her strong right hand—and thought. If the devil ever stands beside a mortal who is hesitating on the edge of a crime, he stood by that woman's elbow, as the minutes dragged slowly by, and the paraffin lamp grew dim, and the glowing red heart of the fire turned into cold grey ashes, and the wind grew into a powerful blast that shook the house, and the stormy night gave way at last to the unearthly chill of a slowly waking day. The striking of the kitchen clock, the only thing to raise a voice in that silent house, roused her. She stood up, and stretched herself, for she had grown numb and still by sitting so long in the same attitude; but her

mind was made up, and she went to her prayerless rest resolved to carry out her purpose with the resolution of a nineteenth century Judith.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRST ACT OF A TRAGEDY.

“OH, Vi, at last, at last!” It was not much to say, but the words expressed a world of longing, as the two sisters embraced with none the less fervour because they were on the platform of Letherleigh station, and under the eyes of two porters, three passengers, and one station-master. They looked at each other critically, and it was the one who was newly convalescent, who exclaimed in a tone of dismay:

“You’ve been ill, and never said a word about it.”

“No, I’m all right,” and Madge looked it at the moment, for her colour came and went with every variation of feeling. “But I’ve been without you and Hugh, and that accounts for anything. How are they all at home?”

There was much to hear, and much to tell, as they sat over their tea in the cosy drawing-room. Janet had gone away for a change. Mr. Fitzroy had a new curate who was a tremendous help in the parish. Mrs. Fitzroy was as much engrossed as ever with her mothers' meetings, etc., etc. Violet had paid a week's visit to Cranleigh, and professed herself to be passionately in love with General Wilder. Madge asked with a mischievous smile if Frank Wood happened to be there at the same time.

"Oh, yes, of course. I believe he badgered them into asking me," Violet said imperturbably, without the shadow of a blush, and then quickly turning the conversation, begged for news of Dr. Ford.

"Not been drunk for three days, nor has he aided in or abetted, any more deaths during the last month, that I know of," severely.

"Prejudiced as ever, I see; but tell me, seriously, has he been going on better?"

"I believe he has, but you must ask the Templetons. I never see him," loftily.

"If he had a wife, or any womankind about him, I'd call upon him to-morrow."

"But he hasn't, so you can't," laconically.

An amused smile hung about Violet's lips, but she asked the next moment after little Jess, and had to be told the whole story of the scene with Mrs. Schonk.

She listened with great interest, and exclaimed with conviction: "She will kill that child if we don't prevent it."

"No, I've a plan," and Madge began to unfold it. It was as Mrs. Schonk suspected, to place Jess in some institution where she would be brought up carefully amongst other children of gentle birth.

"Why not set about it at once?" her sister suggested practically, for she saw more clearly than Madge the dangers of delay.

"Because the Rector is away at some conference, but he will be back in a few days," cheerfully, "and then I will go after him again. He is just as keen about it as I am."

"Dear man, he is keen about so many

things, but never about self-interest, the ruling passion of the day."

"What a hard and horrid thing to say! You are as bad as Mr. Fane!" indignantly.

"We walk about with our eyes open, and unbespectacled. You always did, and you always will, look through rose-coloured glasses."

"Oh, not now, Vi," with a sudden collapse of all her cheerfulness.

"What! has Hugh turned out to be a Blue-beard or a Don Juan?" with pretended horror.

"How dare you? As if he weren't the dearest old darling that ever breathed!" her great love glowing in her face.

"You wouldn't tell me, if he weren't," with a shrug of her shoulders, and a tenderer look than usual in her blue eyes.

The next day, although it was not very fine, the sisters agreed to go to the Park to find out if Eva had returned. Violet's brightness infected Madge, or perhaps it was the promise of renewed life in every green bud and sprouting leaf,

which made hope revive with all the glad voices of the spring. The birds were singing hilariously, the ferns were sending up bold green fronds, to test the temper of the weather; and over every bare bough of tree or bush there was a delicious vernal shimmer, first sign of the coming glory of the summer. Madge felt exhilarated by the fresh wind and her sister's cheerful companionship, and casting all forebodings away, stepped out briskly by her side. It was disappointing to find, on their arrival at the house, that Miss Grenville was not expected for two or three days; but as they were on the point of turning away, Mr. Grenville came out and begged them to have pity on a lonely old man and pour out his tea. They willingly consented, so he led them into the library where a bright fire looked cheerful after the grey day. Madge took her place at the tea-table, and Mr. Grenville watched the graceful movements of her slender hands with quiet commendation. She was a great favourite of his, and he would have been

quick to notice the ravages which anxiety had made on her appearance, if the fire-light had not given a factitious colouring to her pale cheeks. They got him to tell them some of the experiences of his life, when he faced the world with plenty of pluck, but a pocket almost empty of cash.

Drawn out of his usual reserve by their frank interest, he told the story of his early struggles with an utter absence of self-consciousness, and with a simple earnestness, as fresh memories crowded on him, which gave it almost a dramatic force. Time slipped quickly by, and they were all astonished to find how late it was, when he stopped abruptly, looking like a guilty child, and said he was afraid he must have bored them horribly. They assured him with perfect veracity that they had enjoyed it immensely, and then got up in a hurry because the dressing-bell rang. A pressing invitation to dinner was refused, on the plea that it would break the cook's heart, who had prepared a special sweet for Violet's approval; and then they hurried

across the park, Madge proposing to take a short cut in an oblique direction which would bring them out through a gap in the fence. Frank had taken her that way one night in the moon-light, but everything looked very different in the clear daylight to what it did then; and the short cut becomes long indeed when the memory is still shorter. Madge said she remembered that a Spanish chestnut stood close against the gap, but as those trees were not in full leaf, Violet did not consider this fact to be as satisfactory as a sign-post. The rain which had long been threatening, came down with a steadiness which seemed to imply that it was by no means a passing shower; and to add to their troubles, Madge also remembered that there was an old disused saw-pit somewhere about, down which a keeper had once fallen and broken his neck. After such a warning as that, Violet refused to hurry, and kept prodding the bushes in front of her to see that none of them was concealing "a trap to catch two sunbeams," in the shape of her sister and

herself. It was impossible to go fast under such circumstances, but at last they determined to cling as closely as they could to the fence, take their chance of finding the gap, and if not, go out by the upper gate. When they came upon it at last, they nearly passed by it, without seeing it, because it had been cleverly concealed by a small heap of brushwood. As they pulled it aside the thorns caught in their dresses, and scratched their gloves as well as the fingers within them ; and both drew a deep breath of relief, when they shook themselves free, and stood out in a narrow lane, with a open path before them.

“Where are we now?” Violet asked, as she found herself ignorant of her surroundings.

“At the back of Mrs. Schonk’s.”

“Ugh ! what an out-of-the-way corner it looks.”

The rain pattered down on old rotten cabbage-stalks, battered tins, and broken bits of crockery, in a heap just outside the paling ; and the cold wind played with

scraps of sodden paper, trying to scatter them right and left ; but they clung to earth, and refused to join in the fun like sulky children.

“Come along,” said Madge, as the wind nearly blew her umbrella inside out, and the rain gave her face an unwelcome kiss.

“One moment, I must have a peep,” and stepping carefully, Violet perched herself on the top of the heap, and craned her neck to look over the fence into Mrs. Schonk’s garden. It was very well kept, with neat rows of vegetables, one behind the other, and looking at it with approval, she could not guess how many tears had been dug in with the potatoes, how many moans and pains, how much hard labour, what aching limbs, and what breakings of heart, that patch of ground represented.

“I am sure I heard somebody crying,” and in a moment Madge forgot both her hurry and fatigue, as she climbed up beside her sister. As she looked eagerly over the back of the house, she caught

sight of a wide-opened window. The light was failing fast, though it was still daylight in the open, but the shadow of the trees in the Park fell upon the house, and made it difficult to distinguish any object very clearly, especially through the clouds of driving rain. "I believe that's a child's head close to the sill. "Yes, it's Jess, I know it's Jess," excitedly. She has nothing on but her nightgown, she will catch her death of cold. Oh! what can we do? She won't see us," waving her handkerchief vigorously. "Go back, Jess; shut the window, dear. She can't hear us!" The wind carried the clear sweet voice far away in quite a different direction, and it never reached the ears it was meant for. And still between each howling blast came the pitiful moan of a child in distress. It exasperated the sisters, as they stood out there in the rain, so near, and yet at such a hopeless distance.

"I can't understand it. Why doesn't she go away? She ought to have more

sense," Violet said with some impatience.

"She scarcely moves at all. It isn't like her. It's so very odd," Madge sighed, on the brink of tears.

"We must get round to the front of the house. Which way?"

"This." Madge turned her face homewards down the hedge of a tongue of land which contained some allotment-gardens, and came to a point where the lane joined the high-road. The sisters were obliged to walk down one side of the triangle, and up the other, before they reached the front of Rose Cottage.

Violet proposed that she should be spokes-woman, to which Madge readily consented, as she thought her sister might have more influence. She stood under a leafless tree, which dripped upon her umbrella from every twig of every branch, and the blustering wind nearly blew it again out of her hand, whilst her teeth chattered with the cold; but in her great anxiety about the child,

she was scarcely conscious of her discomforts.

"Well, what did she say?" she asked eagerly as Violet shut the gate behind her.

"Thanked me very much for telling her. Had sent the child to bed, and quite forgotten the window. I really think it was the truth."

"I suppose it was; but she sounds so unusually civil."

"Well, that is nothing to complain of. I daresay she was anxious to make amends for her rudeness to you."

"Perhaps; but I don't understand why Jessie stayed there. I should have thought she was much more likely to climb up, and risk falling out of the window, in her efforts to shut it."

"A child always cries for what it wants, and never thinks of helping itself."

"Not Jess," dissented the other, still feeling that there was something to be explained.

“Well, we’ve done all we can; and don’t you feel rather hungry?” Violet asked as she quickened her steps, and thought of her dinner, never dreaming as she hurried along that the first act of a tragedy had been played out before their eyes.

Mrs. Schonk, instead of going upstairs to shut the window, threw a shawl over her head, went out into the back-garden, and mounting on an ivy-grown stump close against the fence, looked up and down the lane. There was no thoroughfare at the upper end, for the park cut right across it and stretched to the high-road; and the lane was rarely visited by anyone except the poachers, who found the gap in the fence a convenient method of ingress or exit. Her face looked ghastly under the black shawl, and her expression was stern as death itself. For a whole hour she waited, standing there like a sentinel on the grimmest watch that was ever kept. She felt no weariness, for her nerves and muscles were strong as iron; and she had no more pity

for the child moaning so miserably at the window behind her, than the stump on which she had taken her stand. Pity? She would have scoffed at the suggestion. Had anyone in the whole world ever had pity on her? Had anyone ever shown her love or even kindness? She had made her own way with no help and no favour; and as others had done towards her, so she would mete it to them again. Even Patrick Ford, the boy whom she had liked better than anyone else, he would have turned against her soon enough if fear had not shut his mouth. He hated her, she had seen it in his eyes, even if he had not told her so, as plainly as man could speak. But two can play at that game, and her hatred would be as different to his, as different in strength, endurance and depth, as the storm-tossed waves of the sea, to the little puling streams by a road-side. It was quite dark when she came slowly through the garden, having ascertained that no one was lurking outside to spy on her proceedings. A faint, pathetic, crooning noise still came from the upper

storey, but she scarcely noticed it. Suddenly this woman of iron stood still, her hands clenched tight, her breast heaving, a cold sweat breaking out on her forehead. There was something white lying by the door of the coal-hole, the place where Ruth had died! For one whole minute she was rooted to the spot, unable to move, but the next she hurried into the house by the back door, her head averted. Fear, not conscience, or repentance, took her upstairs, and into the back bedroom. With hurried fingers she untied the child from the chair to *which she had fastened her*, whilst she muttered hoarsely: "If they come back—I can't do it—no, that I can't."

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The next morning she missed a white apron, and found it lying damp with dew in the path, and her lip curled in the utmost scorn of her own folly. Frightened at her own apron! She would be going to church next, and trembling at that old duffer Lindsay's sensational talk about hell and judgment!

CHAPTER VII.

BREAKING LOOSE.

EVENTS were marching with the swift onrush of an invading army; neither pity, nor justice, nor the claims of common humanity seemed able to stop them. Each day brought a scoundrel's hopes nearer fruition, a woman's cruel plans nearer completion, a child nearer and ever nearer to its death, a girl who had been fatally rash, and even wrong, but never wilfully sinful, nearer to despair. And a woman's despair is far more awful than the gentle falling to sleep of a little child.

"Congestion of the lungs! do you believe it?" Violet asked with incredulity in every line of her face, as the sisters turned away from Mrs. Schonk's door on the fourteenth of May.

"Yes, only too probable, Vi, that child

will die," Madge said with the tears standing in her large eyes.

"She shall *not* die," Violet replied with the determination that belonged to her. "Where's her mother? We must get hold of her, and Dr. Ford as well."

"How can we get hold of a woman whom we've never seen, and who lives nobody knows where?"

"Stop a bit," looking thoughtfully down on the ground as if a solution of the difficulty were to be found in a puddle. "Mrs. Lewis like other people has a friend, and that friend's address you have on the envelope which Jess gave you."

"What a memory you have! I had quite forgotten it; but then I've so much to think of," she added with a sigh of self-pity.

"That envelope you put in your desk, and if we are very quick, we may save the one o'clock post. I will look at Bradshaw as soon as we have found out the town, and then you can offer to meet her—say to-morrow." Violet's thoughts went as quick as her steps, and they both hurried along in

spite of the sudden warmth of the weather. As they turned the corner they came face to face with Patrick Ford. He flushed with surprise and pleasure, as he raised his hat, but afraid to stop, or say a word, he was passing on when Violet's hasty, "Wait a moment," stopped him, and he stood still, trying hard to look as composed as she did herself, and to hide his delight in the depths of his heart. Full of the business which was occupying her thoughts, she fixed her bright eyes on his face, as she asked him if he knew that Jessie Lewis had congestion of the lungs.

A quick change came over him, all the delight vanished from heart and face. Was he never to have the pleasure of speaking to Violet Fitzroy, without something about that detestable woman Schonk turning up?

"I did not know it, and I was not likely to know it," he answered almost sullenly.

Madge had walked on, engrossed in her thoughts, and not in the least aware that her sister had stayed behind.

“But you do know it now?” said Violet remorselessly, “and I sincerely hope you will act upon it.”

“What do you expect me to do?” he asked hopelessly, quite certain that she would set him a task that it would be utterly impossible to carry out.

“If I were you, I should go to the house now, and say that I wanted to see the child,” she said promptly, with a feminine capacity for ignoring all difficulties.

“Impossible. We doctors have to wait till we are sent for.”

“But she won’t send for you till the last moment.”

“Probably not; but I can’t force an entrance.”

“You would come directly if the child’s mother sent for you?” with a searching look as if half expecting him to say “No.”

“The woman has not been heard of for ages. I doubt if she will ever turn up again. She does not seem half so interested in her own child as you do, Miss Fitzroy,” in a tone of polite wonder.

"I believe she will be here to-morrow; but you won't tell Mrs. Schonk?" she added quickly in alarm at her own indiscretion.

"I don't know what you take me for!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "Do you think that I am in league with her to destroy every child that comes into her house?" his injured feelings carrying him away on to dangerous ground.

"No, Dr. Ford," speaking very quietly, "or you would be the last man I should appeal to. Good-morning."

"One moment, Miss Fitzroy," he said almost imperatively, for his excitement had grown beyond his powers of control. He was determined that this girl whom he admired so much more than any other, should not go away from him with an infamous opinion as to his real character. "Let me tell you that if this child dies, I am as guiltless as you are yourself."

Her cheeks flushed, but her blue eyes looked bravely up into his from under the brim of her sailor-hat. "That is tantamount

to saying that you will do your best to save her," she said with her sweetest smile.

The smile bewildered him, and made him forget what he was just about to say.

"You sha'n't judge me either by her life or death," he said hoarsely. "It will be six months I suppose, or six years, before ever we meet again, and it had better be sixty, if you can't think of me except as an assistant murderer."

"Would you care to know how I really think of you?" she asked, wishing herself at the same time miles away, but with an irresistible desire to soothe his hurt feelings.

He bent his head, whilst his impulsive Irish heart beat with quickened throbs.

If she had known what an absurd value he put on every word she uttered, she would have been dumb as the milestone by which she was standing.

"I think that there is a secret in your life which makes it hard for you," she said gently, for she felt as if she were treading on egg-shells, "but that you are struggling to do your duty against heavy odds." Then

alarmed at her own audacity, she fled down the road after one quick look at his strangely agitated face.

"Let me see," Madge said, looking up from the Bradshaw of which she had already possessed herself. "Miss Douglas at Edenbridge Castle gets my letter by the first post and telegraphs at once to Mrs. Lewis, and Mrs. Lewis, if she doesn't live very far off, is to catch the twelve o'clock train?"

"Yes; the one which arrives at twelve," Violet said rather breathlessly.

"I believe you've been talking to Dr. Ford." Madge looked at her curiously. "What did he say?"

"That he can't go unless he is sent for."

"Just like him!" with unflattering emphasis.

"Just like every other doctor," Violet replied promptly, taking a different view to the one of a few minutes before, for she had studied the question from the other side.

Patrick Ford went home at a rapid pace, anxious to be alone to think out the situation. He saw that he was going to be placed in the same unbearable position as

he was before. He would be called in just in time to give a certificate, but not in time to save the child's life. If she had congestion of the lungs, the malady had probably been brought on by wilful exposure to cold; and if Jessie, through insufficient diet, had no strength to battle against the disease, she would certainly sink under it. He shut himself up in the room he called his study, refused any luncheon, though his house-keeper pressed it on him with the anxious interest that domestics give to single men, and sat quite still with his elbows on the table, his face hidden in his hands. It was the turning-point of his life. Should he go on as he had begun, adding sin to sin, cowardice to cowardice, whilst year after year some child was starved or chilled to death, and he stood by a silent witness, and therefore an accomplice in the act? No — a thousand times No. And yet, though it was so easy to say "No," it was desperately difficult to act upon it. If he did his duty and exposed Mrs. Schonk,

he might take it for granted that she would rake up that old mischance of seven years ago, and make it look like intentional murder. There would not be a soul to stand by him. He had alienated the better class of people, such as the Manners and the Grenvilles, by his disorderly ways, and he had offended the lower class by his recent small attempts at reformation. Some looked down upon him because he no longer went about in a flash dog-cart with a showy horse. Both cart and horse had gone from him to pay out-standing debts, and whenever a patient sent for him he had to tramp the distance on his own feet. This was a nuisance which, however, was good for his health. Others had not a good word to say for him, simply because the convivial dinners which he used to give at the Red Lion had grown few and far between, whilst many judged him by his past excesses, and knew nothing about his despairing efforts to pull himself up. It is so uncommonly easy to get a bad name, so abominably difficult to get rid of it.

Ford raised his head, and looked round the untidy room with an expression of weary disgust. What enjoyment had he drawn from life during these last few years? Here he was with nobody but a half-drunken housekeeper to look after him—a dusty, dirty, disreputable-looking house, a garden with unmown lawns, and unpruned bushes, and trees fighting for room in the small space. And as to himself—that was the worst of all—gone all the high hopes with which he had begun, gone the religion that used to keep him straight, gone the eagerness for study, gone the power of strong resolve—his feet on the edge of a slippery precipice, his will, his self-respect, his very manhood in the hands of an unscrupulous woman! He clenched his fist, and rammed it hard upon the table. Somebody seemed to be shaping his life for him in a different pattern. Was it God? or was it blind chance which had placed a girl in his path to stop him? She would not let him go down without stretching out her kind

hand to save him. She thought he could be saved—she thought it worth while, at least, to try. No one else had cared to do it. She was only a chance visitor, but when she was most needed she was there, like an angel in the road to prevent him from going on to destruction. He walked up and down the room, with his brows drawn together. He must strike out for freedom—this very day, if it were to be done at all. His eye fell upon the brandy bottle standing as usual in its convenient corner, like the Tempter at his elbow. At least he was man enough to free himself unaided from the curse of drink. He caught up the bottle impulsively, and flung it out of the open window on to the gravel, where it smashed into a hundred splinters. He stared at it, as if it had got there without his volition. That was the first step, but how about the second? If Mrs. Schonk lifted up her voice against him, the parrot-cry of “I told you so” would go the round of the neighbourhood. Those who had scouted him for lesser

sins would point to that greater sin of the past, and find their justification. Violet Fitzroy would hear of it, and turn from the mere thought of him with a shudder. In the one case she would hate him, in the other she would both despise and hate. In the one case he would lose the fractional amount of respect that the world had to give him; in the other, he would regain his lost self-respect and feel that he had acted like a man, and not a cringing brute. His brain felt in a whirl, and he leant his head against the framework of the window as if to rest it. The time was ripe for action of some sort, for he hated his life as it was. Its loneliness was unbearable, its degradation had begun to sting. Why should he be always on the wrong side, with the best men and the purest women always against him? Why not cross over to the other side whilst his life was young within him, and the powers of his intellect in their prime? It was difficult, but he could make it possible if he chose. And as he bent the whole

power of his brain on the question a door seemed to open before him. He could telegraph to George Fairfax, and ask him to exchange practices for a time. Fairfax would expose Mrs. Schonk, and save Jessie's life if possible; and meanwhile he, Patrick Ford, would find out the husband of the woman he had killed by mischance, confess his crime to him, and place himself unreservedly in his hands. If Mr. Askew chose to prosecute him, he would feel happier standing in the dock, than shuffling through a shameful existence, with bent head, and crippled will at "The White House," because at last he would have acted like a man, and not like a "funky coward." He dashed out of the house as if he thought the spirits of evil would try to hold him back, sent off his telegram, and waited with wild impatience for the answer. It came in an hour, short and to the point. "Expect you to-night. Will be at Letherleigh to-morrow.—Fairfax." And by that sixpenny wire it might almost be said that a soul was saved.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BALL AT THE CHASE.

IT was the day of the ball, Eva Grenville came home late for dinner, and was dressed for the grand event in a scramble. She was in such a state of joyous excitement that she talked absolute nonsense, and put on her gorgeous garments hind part before. The patient maid received a scolding for it, which she bore like a voluntary martyr, although she knew that it was her mistress's fault. At the Priory, one sister was brimming over with fun and happiness, laughing over the two bouquets sent by her devoted swain, one for herself chaperoned by another for the deserted Madge, wondering how many dances he would have the audacity to claim, and hoping that she would have so

many partners that she would be able to keep them from him, if she wanted to tease him. She went about the house with a smile on her lips, and a sparkle in her eye, with an exquisite bit of chaff on the very tip of her tongue, which she meant to fire off at him, as soon as she could get the chance. And Madge? The sisters seemed leagues apart, for whilst the one was as jocund as the gladdest bird in spring, the other was making a brave fight to bear up against a heavy load of something akin to despair. Every now and then she pressed her hand to her forehead, feeling as if her brain were beginning to reel. Three hundred pounds of Hugh's money gone, and nothing, absolutely nothing, received in return! Instead of longing and counting the days for his return, she was hoping, wildly hoping, that something would occur to delay it. If she had hated him, she could not have wished more fervently to put him off. A brief respite, only a week or so, and Mr. Lewin had promised

that it should be all right. But if he came now, the truth *must* come out. He would not say much to her, but one look would be sufficient, and then all his fury would be turned on Mr. Lewin and Dorrien White. He would curse the one as a meddler, the others he would probably accuse of cheating, and make a row in the office. Everything would be stopped, everything lost; and then they would go miserably on, with this wrong always dividing them, and with all hope gone. With these cheering thoughts in the background of her mind, she yet had the pluck to talk about ball-dresses, to discuss various modes of coiffure, to laugh about "the chaperoning bouquet," though she felt as if she were dancing a saraband, or a *pas-de-quatre* at a funeral. No one knew what it cost her, and Violet's bright wits were for once too much occupied with her own concerns to notice her sister's. But when they were sitting at dinner, the evening post came in, and she saw Madge look at least as if she had seen a ghost,

as she sat with white lips, staring at a letter which waved up and down in her shaky hand.

"Good heavens! what is it?" she cried, thinking of shipwrecks, railway accidents, and a dead brother-in-law, all in the space of a moment.

"Hugh is coming home to-morrow," was the slow answer in which there was not the slightest spice of joy.

"Dear, how you scared me! What did you look like that for?" in natural irritation. "You might have been a widow twenty times over."

"Oh, don't, Vi!" with a shiver. "I can never joke about that."

"Well, but if you look like that when he's coming, what *would* you look if he said he couldn't?"

"If he could never come, do you mean that?" in a dull, level voice, as she put the letter back in its envelope. "Why, I hope I should die very soon."

Violet was utterly mystified. For one instant she had imagined that Madge was

not quite so entirely devoted to her husband as she used to be ; but now that she talked calmly of dying as a matter of course, if she lost him, her behaviour could not be accounted for logically from any point of view.

“And now we must go and dress, or we shall be late,” just with the same tone and expression as she might have had if a hearse were at the door, ready to drive off to humanity’s last resting-place.

“Aren’t you well, darling ?” Violet threw her arms round her sister, and looked tenderly into her troubled face.

Madge pushed her away almost roughly, and then with swift repentance, drew her towards her, and kissed her passionately ; and afterwards, as if afraid of being questioned, got up quickly from her seat, rang the bell, and hurried out of the room, repeating again that they would be late.

Violet was seriously uneasy, but she was young and rather “impressioned,” if not quite in love, and there was a very smart ball-dress waiting for her upstairs : and under such circumstances as these, a

disagreeable thought is soon crushed. When Madge re-appeared she looked fairly beautiful, in a rich white corded silk bordered in gold, with tight-fitting bodice, with sleeves and chemisette of golden tissue. Her brown hair was done in soft curls, which were bound round with strings of pearls, and showed the shape of her well-cut head, and she carried in her hand besides Frank's bouquet of snow-white lilies, a white feather-fan with gilded sticks. Her face was very pale, and her eyes looked twice their normal size, but her lips were red as the reddest rose-bud, and her lashes and brows looked almost black in contrast to the whiteness of her cheeks.

She was very silent in the carriage, and she entered the crowded drawing-room at the Chase with a far-away look in her eyes, as if she were walking in a dream, whilst Violet followed her draped in shell-pink, and looking like the incarnation of youth and hope, with all her wits about her, and bright eyes looking right and left for the man who was close at her elbow.

The party from the Park were grouped on the opposite side of the room. Eva looked regal in a cream-coloured satin embroidered in pearls and white jet. Diamond brooches starred her bodice, and sparkled amongst her dark hair, whilst the whole front of her skirt shimmered as if with countless jewels cast on it by a lavish hand.

When Mrs. Manners was announced, Godfrey Fane detached himself from this group, and came forward to meet her with a deference almost amounting to tenderness, such as he showed to no other woman there. There was something to him so pathetic and so appealing in the expression of her delicate face, that he felt as if she wanted help and protection, and as if he were the only man who could give it her safely. He piloted her through the well-dressed crowd, past the women who tried to detain him with their smiles, and the men who wanted to catch him by the button-hole, till they reached a corner where his uncle was sitting in a high-backed chair more than three hundred years older than himself. When the introduction was

over, he was obliged to leave them, but not till he had found a chair for Madge, and placed it close to Sir Adrian's; and even then, though he went away, Eva's jealous eyes saw him stand and watch the brown head bending forward to the silvered one, as if he thought it the prettiest picture in the whole room, as indeed it was, each high-bred face in perfect contrast to the other, the one old and lined, and sharpened by age, the other with every delicate outline softened by the touch of youth.

The band struck up the first notes of "Adoration." Lewin, whom Eva had brought with her partly out of bravado, partly because she thought he might be useful, said with his grating voice close to her ear, "So we were all kept waiting for Mrs. Manners! Coming it strong!"

She winced as if he had struck her, but answered disdainfully, "Absurd! it was Lady Blank. She is always late on principle." All the while she was looking about for Fane, wondering why he did not come to claim her. She was engaged half-way down her card,

but the first she had kept for the man who was very slow in coming to ask for it, and she was nearly biting her lip through in her agony of impatience.

"Are you going to dance this with Fane?" Lewin asked, as Frank Wood whirled past with Violet Fitzroy, looking as proud of his partner as if she were a thoroughbred in a selling-race, and he had distanced all bidders.

"No, of course not," she said with presence of mind; "he is far too busy to think of dancing just like anybody else."

"Then don't you think we might as well begin? No use in standing out."

"Perhaps, but I'm in no hurry," unwillingly consenting, but allowing herself to be led away.

When she stopped after a few turns to fan herself, and take a look round, she saw that Fane was leaning against the wall close by Mrs. Manners' chair. Madge was not dancing, though apparently from no lack of partners, for several men were standing round her, as if each were

waiting for his chance. Amongst them were Major Marston and Captain Seagrave, who had been dropping down on Letherleigh several times during the summer, and now considered themselves as old friends of the wife's, as well as of the husband's. Madge was the only young person who had elected to sit still instead of joining in the jostling throng, so it was natural that Fane should prefer to be with her, than to talking scandal, or wearing out the worn thread of the election with some buxom and chattering dowager; but jealousy, as is well-known, distorts the simplest action, and gives it a sinister significance.

"Where have you sprung from, Miss Fitzroy?" Eva asked, as Violet and her partner drew up beside her. "I thought you were miles away."

"I arrived three days ago from F—— in Devonshire."

"Ah, now I understand the craze for architecture," and she threw a laughing glance at Frank, who thought it was time

to have another turn, and took to evasion in action, as before in speech.

"I hope you are enjoying your ball?" Fane said to her, as they met in a crowded doorway.

"Is it my ball? I doubt it," with a reproachful glance over her shoulder.

"You needn't," and then someone beckoned him, and he went off, leaving his most winning smile behind him to atone for his flight. She told herself that she was an unreasonable wretch, and her spirits rose as she remembered that he had not only to be host but hostess as well, more than most men would care to undertake. She was besieged with partners and much admired. The Letherleigh heiress was undoubtedly one of the stars of the evening; enthusiastic, beardless boys called her "a ripper," men of the world found her immensely amusing, and some in talking to her lost their heads, whilst many in looking at her dazzling beauty lost their hearts as well. Fane danced with her as soon as he could

spare a moment ; and then as they stood side by side at the end of the magnificent room, with the old faded banners hanging from the rafters of the ceiling, the generations of by-gone Fanes looking down from the panelled walls, in spite of her gorgeous gown, her own personal charms, and the fortune which doubled the gilt on the gingerbread, she felt crushed into insignificance by that long shadowy past, of which Godfrey Fane was the outcome and the product ; and the present, as represented by the comfort and the luxury of the Park, was nothing to her.

“What do you think of our shabby old barrack?” Fane asked as he saw that she was casting inspecting glances round.

“It is the shabbiness that I love. We have nothing like it at the Park,” with a sigh of envy.

Fane laughed. “Instead of cracked panes you have sheets of plate-glass, instead of long dark ghost-haunted passages, you are blazing with electric light in every corner.”

"Would you change?" looking straight up into his face.

"Common-sense says, 'Yes, at once.'"

"But you, what do *you* say?"

"Aren't we one? As for myself, I like the old place in spite of its defects, as we love old relatives, my old uncle for instance, in spite of their infirmities."

"You can look back down the centuries, there was always a Fane."

"It is better to look forward than to look back; you are at the start, and we at the finish, and extremes meet, you know," with a sudden smile.

"Sometimes, perhaps," she said with a quickening of her pulses.

Madge meanwhile had not been sitting on a chair all the evening listening to Sir Adrian's caustic wit, for she had been carried off by one partner after the other; and she had borne herself very bravely. No one had found her a wet blanket damping to spirits as well as to conversation. She was ready to smile at the most futile wit, and always willing to listen rather than to use

her own sweet voice, a virtue that some men prize. But for a moment she was left alone, whilst Major Marston had gone to fetch her fan, and then all her wretchedness came back upon her like a heavy cloud. The light seemed to go out of her face, as it settled down into sadness.

"Don't look like a death's head," Osgood Lewin said in a harsh whisper, as he put his head in through the open window. "For heaven's sake, pull yourself together, if you don't want every gossip in the place to see that there's a screw loose."

She drew up her neck haughtily, offended by the sort of scolding tone in which he had addressed her. He had avoided her all the evening, and now he walked off without giving her the much coveted opportunity of asking him a few questions. "Mr. Lewin," she called after him timidly, conquering her annoyance for the sake of her anxiety, but instead of Osgood Lewin, Godfrey Fane came up to her, and asked if she had been into supper. "Then come with me for a breath of air," he said persuasively, when

he heard that she had been taken in by the greatest grandee in the room, Lord Castle-tower.

The weather had changed during the last few days from January to June, and the atmosphere of the ball-room was growing oppressive, Madge had such an air of delicacy, being slight and very pale, that people instinctively took care of her, as if she were consumptive. Fane would not allow her to move till he had fetched a white fleecy shawl, no doubt a treasure to its unknown owner, and wrapped it round her carefully. This done, he said cheerfully, "Come and see what we look on the outside, you've seen enough of the in," and he led her down the steps from the broad terrace to a lower path shaded by shrubs from many foreign lands, and from which a full view could be had of the old grey mansion with its castellated windows, all aglow to-night with myriads of lights. "The old order changeth," the watchword of the uneasy present seemed to have no place here, for the stones piled up by masons

and builders in a forgotten century under one of the Tudor kings were still standing. And the ivy which clung to the walls with the faithfulness of an old friend had grown with the growth of the Fanes, as the ages rolled on, and most of its far-stretching branches started like those of the ancient family from one fine stem, a stem which was as large in girth as many a young oak. From the lighted windows came a murmur of many voices, and the soft strains of the band in one of the sweetest German waltzes; whilst here in the peace and the silence, the moonlight fell like a benediction on dewy grass—and early crocuses turned from gold to white by its refining touch—on here and there a stray couple, wandering amongst the shadows eager to get away from the noise of the crowd, and be alone with each other—on Godfrey Fane's good-looking face, as he turned to Madge with a new eagerness in his voice, "At last, we can have a talk."

CHAPTER IX.

ACTING ON IMPULSE.

“WHERE is Fane — anybody seen him?” inquired an eager young man, who had been very active in canvassing, and owed his invitation to his exertions.

“Probably in the supper-room, doing duty with a dowager,” Eva said as she was passing.

Lewin gave a short laugh. “I’d lay any money that he’s in the garden doing duty for an absent husband.”

“Don’t believe it,” she said quietly.

“Will you come and see?”

“Why should I spy upon him? It’s no affair of mine,” loftily.

“You are afraid to find it’s true.”

“I am afraid of nothing, but the room is hot, so I should like a breath of air.”

As she crossed it she cast a glance round, caught sight of Violet just about to dance with Captain Seagrave, saw Major Marston standing up with Mrs. Templeton, but no sign of Madge. Of course she might be in the supper-room with any casual acquaintance or stranger, but instinct told her that she was in the garden with Godfrey Fane, and she felt that to know was an imperative necessity. If she were—what did it matter? she asked herself, as she hid behind another couple, in order to avoid an advancing partner, but, nevertheless, after piecing together the events of the evening, she felt that it did matter, and that if they had stolen away in the darkness like so many other missing couples, “life would never be the same again.”

Lewin took her to the furthest end of the terrace where they were almost alone, and bringing her to the balustrade, said in a whisper, “Run to earth!”

There were two people standing close beside a leafless willow, on the lower path,

and the moonlight fell on a white dress, with something gleaming at the edge of the skirt, on a pair of hands clasped as if in entreaty, on a small white face up-lifted, in what seemed like tenderest confidence, to the man by the girl's side. His face was in shadow, but Eva knew it was Fane, and her heart grew cold within her breast. Even from that distance she could see that this was no ordinary talk between two friends. Madge was crying. Fane bent over her most urgently, evidently begging for something, as he had never begged anything of Eva, as if his whole life was in his prayer. Presently he caught hold of one of Madge's hands and kissed it—an innocent action which had no meaning except sympathy in spite of disappointment at the rejection of service, but it stung like the hardest blow. Eva turned away, furious at what she had seen, indignant at having lowered herself to the level, not exactly of an eaves-dropper, but a spy, angry with Lewin for having brought this upon her, and having

consequently witnessed her humiliation. For a wonder he had the tact to keep his triumph to himself, as she walked rapidly along the terrace with her head in the air. This explained everything. Oh, what a consummate fool she had been! She never had understood why Godfrey Fane came forward one day and held back the next, why Madge was crushed instead of exhilarated by the news of her husband's projected return. He had been attracted by her from the first, but Madge was so different then, a simple country girl with no thought or hope beyond her Hugh. And it was Hugh's friend who had come between them! Oh, what treachery, what mean, pitiful baseness! Fane, whom she had thought so much nobler, better, purer, than any of the average men of the day! Oh! what could she do to save herself from being the laughing-stock of the neighbourhood? The knowing glances, the mischievous innuendoes with which she had been so constantly met, when she was canvassing for him, all came

back to her now and mocked her. They had given him to her unanimously, as if there had been a plebiscite of the county in her favour; and now, what would they say when it came out that he refused to be given? These thoughts flashed through her mind with great rapidity, as she walked from one end of the terrace to the other. She went up to the balustrade and leant her white arms upon its covering of dark ivy, looking out into the beauty of the shadowy garden below with passionate revolt in her heart. Why had this happened to her? Why should she, with her beauty, her wit, her fortune, be so be-littled before the world? She was not a door-mat to be trodden under foot. She was not a poor, neglected creature whom everyone passed by, whom no one cared for. Suddenly she remembered the man by her side, and faced round upon him fiercely: "Haven't you a word to say? Has that melodramatic flirtation stopped your tongue?"

"I am too much occupied with my own

to bother myself about other people's," he said in a low voice.

"Your own flirtation?" slowly, with an odd tone in her voice, which he felt that he did not understand.

"No, don't call it that," and involuntarily his words quickened with his pulses. "If ever—if I might, if you would only listen—"

"If you've anything to say I'll listen fast enough," she said with a bitter little laugh.

"Eva, I'm mad to say it, but I love you, love you with my whole heart and soul," he broke out passionately, his features working, great drops standing out on his forehead, as he possessed himself of one of her hands. Yes, he had said it, the truth was out; but, good God! if she knew!

"Are you sure?" drawing herself a little further away, and not even troubling to look at him; "not one little bit kept for someone else?"

"Not a shred, on my honour." The word came out glibly, and seemed sufficient

guarantee. And then mad, delirious hope of possible success seized him, and he threw his arm round her. What he said he never knew, but all that had been growing with the speed of a fungus-plant during the last fortnight poured out in words of fire, and the girl listened, as she had promised, thrilled and excited, but without one grain of emotion. This was the real thing, and she knew it. There was no make-believe, no trumped-up sentiment here to save appearance. The man loved her, and the knowledge was balm to her wounded pride. She drew herself forcibly from his attempted embrace, but she left her hand in his for a minute, and his head reeled with guilty happiness.

She stood quite still, drawn up to her full height, whilst he was begging her hoarsely for a decided answer. He knew that the devil had given him this one opportunity, but he might never have another. The very next day Fane might make his peace, and then his last chance would be gone. It was now, or never again. He fixed

his eyes on her beautiful face, pale and irresolute now, with a new hesitation in the uncertain curve of her lips and the downward droop of her lashes; he seemed as if he would wring an answer from her by the power of his gaze, even against her will. At last she turned, but still without looking at him: "Yes—but don't make a fuss about it," she added nervously, as she caught a glimpse of his radiant face.

As he took her back to the ball-room, his heart was beating like twenty hammers, and he was dazed, almost terrified, by his success. The long concealment of weeks, months—was it years? it seemed so long—was over! He had spoken, and she had answered. He had asked her to be his wife, and over there in Edenbridge Castle, his other wife was living—living or dead? he scarcely knew. No matter—he cared for nothing else in earth or heaven—he had won the heiress of Letherleigh, and the jubilant notes of the band in the last galop seemed to be playing a triumphant march in his honour. Everyone was streaming into

the hall, where there was a general murmur of leave-takings. Frank Wood, of course, was in attendance on Violet, with a great deal still to say as if they had never met before that night; and Fane was seeing Mrs. Manners to the carriage in a commonplace way, just as if that scene in the garden had been no more than a dream. Eva was close to the door, and saw that their hands met in silence, whilst Madge's wistful eyes looked straight up into Godfrey's face, as if asking for something that her lips were afraid to utter.

Then he shut the door, and Frank darted forward, still with something more to say, to which Violet responded with a light-hearted laugh.

Eva frowned, for that laugh jarred like comedy in the midst of tragedy; conflicting emotions were absolutely seething within her, and it was with the utmost difficulty that she could preserve any sort of calm. Unused as she was to the exercise of any self-control, she felt as if, if she opened her mouth, she would scream. The moment

she was dreading came. Fane turned and saw her, standing close beside him in her wrap of crimson plush. Even if he had wished to avoid her, he could not have done it, but that he did not wish to was abundantly evident.

With a bright smile, and two cordially outstretched hands, he said: "Where have you been hiding all this while? As I missed the first, I fully meant to have the last."

Eva said nothing at all. Instead of putting her hands into his, she grasped her bouquet tightly, as if somebody were tearing it from her. Her heart was throbbing wildly, her chest heaved tumultuously, her eyes stared straight out of the open door into the grey face of breaking day.

"Excuse me, but you would have had to ask my leave," broke in the rasping voice of Osgood Lewin, surely then more rasping than ever before.

"I should have asked nobody's but Miss Grenville's," haughtily.

"You don't know that Miss Grenville is

the future Mrs. O. L." Even as he said it in his vulgar, low-bred triumph, he was seized with a spasm of terror. Fane always seemed to find out everything. What if he knew that there was one Mrs. Osgood Lewin already? He waited breathlessly for any reply, but at first there was dead silence—a silence that seemed to the girl perfectly endless. Which she hated most at the moment, she could scarcely have told, but she hated them both, she knew that, and herself as well, and she longed to be miles away from them, and from the fate that was sure to follow her.

"Is this true?" Godfrey Fane asked in a low, but perfectly steady voice, addressing the girl, not the man who claimed to own her.

Then he waited inexorably for his answer, and there he would wait, she knew, until she gave it. "It is nothing to you, you needn't pretend," she said hoarsely, scarcely able to get any voice to say it in, the love of all these months struggling with the hate of the last half hour, and nearly stifling it.

“ I only ask, is it true ? ” very quietly.

Oh, if the earth would only swallow her ! All the triumph that she had promised herself dwindled away as she realised that the love of Osgood Lewin could never be thought a great prize to win. The gulf which had separated the two men seemed to have widened immeasurably, and she was humbled to the dust at the consciousness that she was on the wrong side, with the wrong man. She gave one glance at Godfrey's stern face ; their eyes met, but there was no softening on his part ; with a cold, calm scrutiny he was studying her, a great astonishment mingling with his huge disgust.

Many impatient glances were thrown at him as his guests hurried by, and one carriage after another rolled away from the door, but his whole attention was given to Eva Grenville, whom he had never admired so much as now, with all the rich colour gone from her cheeks, and a look of sheer desperation in her dark eyes.

“ Is it true ? ” he repeated for the third

time, and driven into a corner, knowing that the answer would come from Lewin if not from herself, she bent her head in assent.

Was it fancy, or did she hear him draw a deep breath, the only outward expression of emotion that a self-controlled man will allow himself?

The next moment he made her a profound bow, and said with ceremonious politeness: "Then allow me to offer you my sincere congratulations."

It was the baldest, most trite remark that he could have made; but if he had slapped her on the face, she could not have been more indignant, for she gauged the depth of its sarcasm. If she had been Lady Clara Vere de Vere she might have left the Chase with quiet dignity, but this was impossible to Eva Grenville, who was a mere child of nature in spite of conventional polishing and scraping. She must give some expression to the rage which possessed her; and as she was not quite so far gone as to strike him with her fan, she did the next best thing;

and remembering that the flowers she held in her hand came from him, she flung them down on the marble floor and crushed them under her dainty high-heeled shoe before the astonished eyes of the few remaining guests, and half-a-dozen footmen. Then she darted a furious glance at his calm face, and said hurriedly : “ I prize your congratulations as much as your flowers.”

On a whirlwind of passion she swept out of the wide-open door, and jumped into the brougham. Lewin attempted to follow her, but she motioned him back with an imperative gesture ; the coachman, eager to get home, whipped up the willing mare ; and sitting bolt upright, with a white face, and clenched hands, she was driven away from the grand old Chase which she had entered in such a state of joyous excitement only a few hours before. She saw nothing of the glory of the dawn breaking in roseate splendour over splendid giant elms, and dewy lawns, driving away the gloom of night with the gladness of the golden sunshine. For her mind was

focussed on the one desperate fact—that she had mistaken friendship for love, and made a hash of her life in consequence.

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And as for Fane, even Lewin could not make out if he were hard hit, or even hit at all. He shrugged his shoulders slightly as the flowers fell at his feet, but that might have been because of natural annoyance at the *esclandre* such an action would make amongst the gossips. He shook hands heartily with Mr. Grenville, laughed in reply to some chaff of Frank Wood's, and watched the party from the Park arranging themselves in the omnibus with a pleasant smile, and a cheery remark now and then. If he were wild with anger or disappointment, mad with jealousy or disgust, he was an uncommonly good actor. The lynx-eyes of his servants were upon him, but they discovered nothing. They watched eagerly to see if he stooped to pick up the despised bouquet, but he passed by it, as if he did not even see it, and gave vent to a yawn, instead of a sigh.

CHAPTER X.

“I AM HER MOTHER!”

EVA could find no rest in her bed, for sleep naturally refused to come near her, after her outrageous proceedings. Over and over again she thought of the events of the evening, and the more she thought, the deeper grew her conviction that she had made an utter fool of herself. What had become of her fierce indignation, her biting scorn? They had changed their drift from Godfrey Fane to Eva Grenville, as common-sense began to assert itself. Could his eyes have met hers so frankly, if he were fresh from a passionate love-scene with the wife of his dearest friend? Could he have held up his head so serenely if he had just trampled his honour under foot? What on earth had possessed her to do this mad

thing—to accept a man whom she despised, even when she liked him most, in order to pique another man who would not care a straw? If she could not have Godfrey Fane at least she might be free, and free she *must* be. She would tell Mr. Lewin so that very morning. If he were nasty about it, as he was sure to be, she would send him very quickly about his business. In the egotism of her present mood, she could not spend one grain of pity for him and his broken hopes; all her pity was for herself, and her own mistakes. There would be nobody left but the dear old Dad, she went on with the tears running down her cheeks, and very happy they must be together, as they had been for all these years before—what reason was there against it? Her love for Godfrey Fane—how she blushed even under the sheets—was only over-grown friendship, so it need not matter at all.

In another room, only a few doors off down the corridor, Osgood Lewin was pacing up and down, in a state of wild excitement. He had made no pretence of going to bed,

for his nerves were in such a condition that he would have found it impossible to keep still. He had succeeded beyond his wildest hopes. Eva Grenville, who had seemed as far beyond his reach as the morning star he had seen over the grey turrets of the Chase an hour ago, had actually consented to be his wife ; and although this fact made his pulses leap with almost delirious joy, now that he was calmer and by himself, undazzled by her presence, he was absolutely aghast at his own success. Unscrupulous as he was, and unprincipled as well, it had never entered into his plans to play such a dangerous game as bigamy. He had only meant to ingratiate himself with the heiress whilst his wife was dying, and propose to her when his wife was dead ; but events had marched too quickly on the one side—too slowly on the other ; and the up-shot of it was that he had an actual wife, and a promised wife both on his hands at the same moment. He had sense enough to realise that his engagement stood on the most precarious footing, so that it was eminently advisable to clench it with a

marriage ceremony as soon as it could possibly be managed. But how could he even propose to fix a date, when his wife might still be living when the day arrived? And yet if he let one tuft of grass grow under his feet, Fane might explain away that compromising *tête-à-tête* with the charming Madge Manners, and then the chances of Osgood Lewin would not realise a fraction in the market. He told himself that he was in a "devil of a hole," but he chuckled with glee at the thought that he had won all along the line. Happiness made him almost benevolent, and he gave quite a kindly thought to Madge. Poor little girl, he had spoken rather roughly to her that night, but he would drop a line to Harris, and tell him to let her down more gently than the rest. If there was any quid to spare, he might send her a moderate cheque, just to keep up her spirits. She had been very useful to him in her scene with Fane, and though she did it to oblige nobody, least of all himself, he owed her a good turn for it, and perhaps it might bring him luck, he added with the superstition that

often survives a despised religion. With this feeling strong upon him, he dashed off two lines to be left at the Priory early in the morning, in which he told Madge that he hoped to arrange everything satisfactorily with Messrs. Dorrien White & Co., and induce them to send her a cheque before Captain Manners' arrival. This done, he felt as if he deserved well of fortune, and might now indulge himself in dreams of the delightful time before him. He threw the window wide open, and leant out to enjoy the dewy freshness of the May morning. There is a hallowed peace about the early hours, before the stillness of the day is broken by the sounds of toil or pleasure, but to Osgood Lewin it brought a different sort of message. It was just such a morning as this when he first saw Mary Douglas, with a basket of primroses and violets in her hand, looking sweet and young as any spring-flower in the old-world garden at the Castle. What a mess he had made of her life. He remembered now that there was a young curate-fellow awful spoons on

her—how madly jealous he was of him, and how he hated him—but she would have been far happier with him. That was past and gone, like last year's plans and hopes; he would make a model husband to Eva, she should have nothing to complain of, and, Great Scot! it would be ripping to have a settled income, with nothing risky about it! And the child? Plague it all, how these two bothered him! Of course she should be hidden up somewhere, and he would have to pay something for her food and education, when her mother had slipped the hooks; but that would keep, and to-day he would think of nothing but Eva Grenville, the girl who, with her brightness, her beauty, and last, not least, her fortune, was to compensate to him for all the mean shifts to which he had been reduced in the effort to keep himself afloat during all these last lean years.

Madge woke up that morning, with a dread of the day before her, a day which she had to live through, as best she could. But Lewin's note gave her a ray of hope,

and made it possible for her to greet her sister with a smile. A telegram had come to say that Miss Douglas would arrive at twelve o'clock, so she ordered the cart and drove to the station to meet her. Violet said that she would walk up the road towards Mrs. Schonk's, in case that dear lady might be troublesome; having an idea, founded on many facts, that she might be useful in an emergency. As Madge waited outside the station, she forgot her own anxieties completely, in compassion for Jess's mother. Supposing that she had been very ill all this time, and even now was unable to come, and could only send this friend in her place, what must her feelings be? Her little one dying, and she not able to give her a last kiss!

Then the train came up with a hiss and a snort, and the first passenger to get out was Mary Lewis, looking a mere wreck of her former self. She shot through the booking-office, throwing down her ticket as she went, and arrived panting at the cart. "Mrs. Manners," she gasped—"my child?"

Then Madge knew in a moment that this was Jess's mother, and not a mere friend. She gave her a tender kiss, and told her quickly that she was in time, she had sent to inquire, and Jess was no worse.

In her eagerness to get into the cart, Mary stumbled and would have fallen, but for the Rector who came up just in time to catch her. Madge was delighted to see him, and briefly explained that Jess was very ill, and that this lady had come down to see her.

"Not seriously ill, I hope?" he asked anxiously, with a very grave face, and as Madge shook her head expressively, he said he would come with them if she would let him. She was only too glad to have him, so she surrendered the reins to him, and the pony was sent along at a smart trot. Mary Lewis could not speak a word, but she sent up constant prayers to the Throne of mercy, as they drove fast through the village, past the Priory, past budding hedges and all the young beauty of the trees, and pulled up with a jerk at Rose

Cottage. She jumped out of the cart almost before it had stopped; but then for a moment she hesitated, held back by a terrible fear. Mr. Lindsay went first and rapped at the door. There was no sound inside, and no one came to answer a second rap. He turned and looked at the two girls, as if asking their advice.

"We must break the window," Mary said hurriedly, her grief growing into ferocity at being kept from her child. She would have been capable of the grossest violence, of murder itself, at the moment, in her determination to get to her at any price, and yet she was the gentlest of mortals. Violet came up just then, followed by several of the neighbours, amongst whom was a market-gardener, to whom the neighbouring plot belonged. He told them that he had seen Mrs. Schonk go up the road five minutes before, but if they were in a hurry to get in, he thought he could open the side-gate into the back-garden.

"Oh, be quick, be quick!" Mary cried

imploringly, and the man ran, nothing loth to do Mrs. Schonk a bad turn in exchange for much insolence. The mother led the way as soon as the gate was opened—nothing could keep her back. She found the back-door open, and ran through the kitchen and up the stairs. Then with a cry of pain and agonised love, she flew into a small room, and bent sobbingly over a golden head, afraid to speak—afraid almost to breathe. Jess was alive, it is true, just alive enough to have a flicker of a smile on her flushed face, as her mother laid her gentle hand upon her hair. Her blue eyes, which seemed now to be half her face, went slowly from one to the other, recognising each in turn as they stood round her bed—all friends—so there was nothing to fear. The Rector held up his hand and said a prayer; the child kept quite still so long as he was speaking, but when his voice stopped she moved her head restlessly, and tried to moisten her dry lips with her fevered tongue.

“She wants something to drink,” Mary

said with a mother's quick intuition. Violet ran downstairs and brought back some water in a cup.

Jess drank it eagerly, and as she finished found voice enough to say one word:—
"Mummy!"

But that one word, in the husky, little voice that used to be so clear, opened the flood-gates of Mary's heart, and kneeling down, and burying her face in the coverlet, she burst into long, gasping sobs, whilst the tears were rolling down the cheeks of both the sisters. Jess tried to raise herself in her bed, perhaps with some idea in her small mind of comforting her mother, as kind people had sometimes comforted her; but the mere effort, useless as it was, brought on a choking cough, which seemed as if it must put out the tiny, flickering flame of the child's life. Mary forgot herself at once, and lifted her gently in her arms, looking round to see if there was no medicine to give her; but the room, though spotlessly clean, was bare of everything beyond a very few articles of furniture. There was no medicine, no jelly,

though some had been sent from the Priory that morning, in fact nothing either to nourish or to heal. Mr. Lindsay's face grew ominously stern. He remembered this child such a happy, healthy, plump little thing—and now she was only a bag of bones, with a bit of feverish skin stretched over them, and a poor little half-broken heart inside. And looking at this diabolical work of Mrs. Schonk's, a humane and gentle man as he was, he felt he could have throttled her with his own hands, and what is more, enjoyed the task! Good God, what a fiend the woman must be, and to think there was a chance of her going unscathed! Where was justice to be found?

“I will go and fetch Dr. Ford,” he said; and then he added resolutely, “If medicine can save her, he shall do it, or I'll make him ashamed to show his face in Letherleigh.”

“Let me go, and I can bring him back in the cart;” Violet's face flushed as she said it, for she thought of their talk in the road, and she was hoping that her words

had not been thrown away. Madge seconded her, because she thought it would be convenient to have the Rector there as a protection, if Mrs. Schonk came back and wished to turn them out. Violet hurried away, and found that the group outside had increased to a crowd. Women had come out bare-headed for a minute's gossip, and had stayed out of curiosity and sympathy. It was the dinner-hour, and the men, instead of taking their dinners under a hedge, had come from the neighbouring fields, to hear what was up at Mrs. Schonk's. As the report spread, that she had starved another child to death, they shook their fists with menacing gestures at the house, and one bearded man, with a motherless baby in his arms, said he would like to see a pack of hounds worry the life out of her, vixen that she was. It did not take long for Violet to reach the White House, but she found it empty. She was told by the untidy-looking housekeeper, that Dr. Ford had gone away the evening before, but that another doctor would arrive

that day. What did it mean? That he had broken loose from whatever hold Mrs. Schonk had over him, and yet did not dare to stay at home and face the consequences. She called him a coward, and then she drew it back. She cogitated over the problem as she drove away, but she could come to no conclusion, and as soon as she got into the crowd, one after another began to question her, as to what she had done, or what she was going to do, and she had no more time for reflection. Several offered to hold the pony, so she threw the reins to the one who looked steadiest, and jumping out, hurried back into the house, where she knew that the others were waiting for her impatiently. Their faces looked blank when she appeared alone, and said that the doctor had gone away. The child was seriously ill, and might slip through their fingers whilst they were doubtful as to remedies. Mary could scarcely contain herself for wild anxiety as she listened to the laboured breath from the poor little chest, and had nothing on which to lay her hands to do her good.

Madge could stand it no longer, and exclaimed with resolution:

"We will take her home, and then the darling can be put into a comfortable bed, and nursed properly."

"Oh, thank you a thousand times." The mother turned, her dark eyes glowing with gratitude. "It will save my darling's life."

"She must come to the Rectory," Mr. Lindsay said thoughtfully, "though we really have no authority for the removal of this child."

Mary drew up her slight figure, and her pale cheek flushed. "I am her mother," she said simply.

The Rector's face cleared. "Then you have more right to her than all the world. You shall take her away at once; and if it please God to save her life, she shall never enter this den of misery again."

He went away to send for a cab; and Madge, feeling sure that Jess had had nothing to eat for some time, and was consequently sinking from exhaustion as much as disease (an idea which had not occurred

to her mother), ran downstairs, and presently reappeared with some milk which a woman had fetched from her cottage. It was pitiable to see how ravenously the milk was drunk by the child, though they had to feed her very slowly ; and when it was done she looked up into the two kind faces above her, and said "Velly good" with the faintest touch of her old manner. Madge could not help crying as she looked down on the wasted little figure, with nothing left of its wondrous beauty but the blue eyes, and the golden hair. She remembered her odd little ways, her sturdy independence, her funny sayings about the "black box," and how she would stay with mummy instead of going "up there." It seemed so very likely that she would have to go, and leave her poor mother behind—and that mother, how young she was—and yet with the sadness of years on the patient pretty face. There was utter silence in the house. Jess was sleeping with her little straw-like fingers curled round one of her mother's. The crowd were all in the front waiting for Mrs Schonk, their

wrath none the less because it was kept under for the sake of a dying child. But although Madge and Violet were kept on the alert by the constant expectation of her coming, she seemed to have been detained by her errand up the road, and the fly arrived to take away her little prisoner before either Death or Mrs. Schonk had come to claim her.

CHAPTER XI.

FACE TO FACE.

THE greatest events of our lives often hinge on the most trivial accidents ; this is what makes some people call us the playthings of Fate, as if we had nothing to do with it ourselves. But we have to do with it. Those accidents are generally the result of our own carelessness or stupidity, and it is only the irony of life which makes such large consequences follow from such tiny things. Eva Grenville overslept herself on the morning after the ball, and the horses for a projected ride came round to the door before she left her room. There they had to wait for half-an-hour whilst she was completing her toilette, and having her hair arranged in neat coils to suit her riding-hat. If she had known what were to be the far-stretching conse-

quences of that half-hour's delay, it is possible that she might have sat up all the remainder of what she called the night, though it was broad daylight when she came home, in order to be sure of being in time. But as she knew nothing of what was before her, she came down the stairs not half as penitent as she ought to have been, and only cross with herself for not having allowed enough time for that scene with Osgood Lewin which she was still firmly resolved on. She was fully alive to the fact that she had behaved rather oddly in the hall at the Chase ; and in case a disagreeable interpretation might have been placed upon her destruction of her bouquet, she feigned the highest spirits, as if she had not a care on her mind. She was humming a tune hilariously, but it came to an abrupt stop when she saw Lewin standing, radiant and expectant, at the foot of the stairs, with a small bunch of flowers which he had collected in the conservatory for her button-hole. There were several people loitering about the hall, or outside the front door, all rather tired of waiting for the heiress. They had

slept at the Park, having come down on purpose for the ball, and had agreed to go for a long ride in order to see the far-famed beauty of the Surrey hills round about Letherleigh. She tossed the little bunch which Lewin presented to her, on to the hall-table, saying carelessly, "Much obliged, but I never wear flowers out riding."

Then the others gathered round her, and she never noticed the scowl on that one man's face as she walked towards the door. The sun was shining with all the jocundity of youth, for the year was still young ; and the brightness of the day seemed to infect the members of the riding-party. Lewin even forgot that momentary offence in the joy of riding by Eva's side, and knowing that she was soon to belong to him. He told himself that he was the luckiest dog in the world, as he studied her chiselled profile, and the grace of her supple figure. And although, in consequence of her secret intentions, she conscientiously contradicted every assertion that he made, he put this down to a fit of perversity, and promised himself ample amends when

they two should be alone together with no outsiders to play the part of policemen, or drawing-room spies. There was a continual flow of badinage from one to the other, and he joined in it so briskly that he was astonished at his own wit. Eva laughed, because in her present mood of reckless defiance, it was far easier to laugh than to be quietly grave. Captain Seagrave was naturally funny, and Osgood Lewin irresistible when he tried to be amusing; witty he had never been, and fun of any kind was out of his line, but this morning he felt inclined to joke like a school-boy. He thought that the dark days were over, that the good time was coming, and he rode on to meet his fate with no penitence for the past, no fear for the future. The intoxication of Eva's presence was upon him, and he forgot both honour and conscience in the enjoyment of it. They passed out of the Park by the upper gate, and came down the road with a clatter of hoofs, and the chatter of many tongues. "What are all those people 'doing?'" Eva exclaimed, suddenly, as she slackened her pace; "Oh

I hope nothing has happened to Jess. You remember her, don't you?"

"The little beggar that 'runned away'? Don't I? Horrid little nuisance! She made us so late, that Mr. Grenville came home, almost as soon as we got in."

"What can it be?" in real anxiety, as she pulled up, and looked round on the excited crowd gathered before Mrs. Schonk's gate. "Been up to her old games," a man explained as he pointed backwards at the house, with a grimy thumb, "starved another child to death—poor little innocent."

"Oh, good heavens! it can't be true," impulsively jumping to the ground and throwing the reins to Lewin—"here, take them."

But Osgood Lewin did not take them, for his eyes were riveted on a small procession coming out of the house. First came the Rector's tall figure, bearing in his arms what looked a mere bundle of shawls and rugs, only that one yellow lock of silken hair escaped from it, and told of the child hidden within. There was motherly Mrs. Lindsay, who had come up in the fly ready to take

half the parish to her heart, if necessary. And Mrs. Manners always ready to do a kindness, and her sister looking unusually subdued ; but who was this—somebody small and slight, with a pale sweet face turned towards the child, and an eager hand catching tremulously at the fringe of the outer shawl? At the sight of her, Lewin's face turned as white as chalk. He sat bolt upright, with Eva's horse plunging unheeded by his side, the blood curdling in his veins, his hair standing on end. His sin had found him out—here was his wife, and there his child ! He took it all in at a glance. For the first long minute he was stunned, and incapable of action—the next, his presence of mind came back to him, and he saw that to get away before he was recognised, was the first imperative necessity. He was riding Boreas, a fiery chestnut belonging to Frank Wood. The horse's temper had been upset by the pressing of the crowd, as well as by the bunging out of Tory's heels, who objected to the way in which Bill Smith, a blacksmith, was holding his bridle, and fidgeting his

delicate mouth ; and when the crowd, unable to keep quiet any longer, broke out into a loud resounding groan of execration, and sundry boys threw stones, meant for the windows of Rose Cottage, but which fell harmlessly in the garden, Boreas stood straight up on his hind legs, and refused to stir a step. Lewin, mad with fear and rage, struck him heavily with his crop between his pointed ears, but this rough treatment fired the thoroughbred's blood. He put down his offended head, and lashed out behind, scattering men, women, and children from the reach of his hoofs, and unseating his rider. Women screamed, boys yelled, men called out warnings or objurgations. Public attention was distracted from Jess to this man struggling with his horse. The horse soon got the best of it, and with one furious plunge sent his rider crash on to his head, where he lay like a log on the road. Eva gave a cry of dismay, but someone else brushed past her with a louder cry of "My husband ! my husband !" Down in the dust she knelt—the deserted wife—tenderly she

took his heavy head upon her knee. This was the man who had wronged her, who had found her in peace, and left her to despair—and yet—oh, the divine properties of a true woman's love!—down upon his cold grey face rained tears of pity and love like gentle dew from heaven!

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He was dead. No doctor was needed to tell them so. One look at his bloodless face was enough. He was gone from amongst them, the man who had been laughing and talking with them only a few minutes ago—gone as completely as if he had never been. “The Lord have mercy on his soul,” the Rector said solemnly. A dazed silence fell upon all, and not a sound was to be heard except the uneasy trampling of horses' hoofs, and the champing of their bits. Osgood Lewin, who had not been of much account in his life-time, dominated the situation now that he was clothed in the majesty of death. The wife forgot all his meanness and desertion, and as she clasped her arms round the now unyielding neck, saw in him the lover of five

years ago, who seemed to bring the sunshine with him whenever he came to the Castle. To Eva, deliverance had come, but in so awful a shape that she shuddered back from it, unwilling to grasp it; and to Madge, leaning against the fence, and shivering in the sunshine, the death of Osgood Lewin meant ruin and despair. Her last hope had gone with this man who had helped her, and whom she had trusted and distrusted in turn.

"Dear Mrs. Manners, you oughtn't to be here. Come away," Major Marston said sympathisingly.

"You don't know what this is to me," her eyes wild and her teeth chattering, as if she were deadly cold.

Alarmed by her appearance, he turned to Mrs. Lindsay, who was unable to move from the fly because she had Jess on her knee. "For God's sake take her home," he said earnestly.

She looked from him to Madge and assented at once. "But the mother," she said, "must come too."

Just then, Eva, who had seemed petrified

with horror, stepped quietly up to Mary, and said in a level voice, quite unlike her own :

“Are you his wife?” with a shudder.

“Yes,” said the other with a break in her voice, “we have been married five years. Oh, my darling!” stooping over him, worthless as he was, in uncontrollable regret.

“Then God have mercy on him!” she exclaimed horror-stricken, and turning to Tory, and away from her own kind, she hid her face on his saddle.

“My dear child,” said Mr. Lindsay gently, “don’t you think you had better go home? There is a covered cart here. I suppose you would wish Mr. Lewin to be taken to the Park?”

Eva raised her face, and even at that moment he noticed, that instead of sorrow, there were horror and disgust in the glance of her eyes. “Have you realised,” she said hurriedly, “that this is his wife—and Jess is his child? Let them all be taken to the Park. They have a right to be with him, and I wish to acknowledge it at once.”

"I don't understand," looking distressed and puzzled, "my wife is such a good nurse, I think it's a pity."

"Please, it must be so—I have a reason."

She gave one shuddering glance towards the dead man's riderless horse; and then, mounting her own, with Captain Seagrave's assistance, said to the Rector, as he still hesitated, "I am going on first to have their rooms prepared."

He yielded most unwillingly, but could not help seeing that the mother ought to be with the husband, the child with her mother. But who would look after her? If neglected any longer, poor little Jess would not have the smallest chance.

"Awful shock to Miss Grenville," Captain Seagrave said in a low voice, "Lewin only proposed to her last night."

"But she refused him?" quickly.

"She accepted him," in an impressive whisper. "That was a facer for us all."

"Good God!" muttered the Rector, dismayed as he thought of the wife who had been sprung upon them so suddenly.

“What an amount of sin and sorrow there must have been in that dead man’s life !”

“Take her away,” suggested Seagrave, looking at Mary, “we can’t do anything whilst she is there.”

Mr. Lindsay put his hand on Mrs. Lewin’s shoulder.

“Remember you have a child,” he said, gently. “She will die, if you don’t see after her.”

She did not need a second bidding, one kiss on the cold forehead, one loving touch, and then she rose quickly, and went eagerly to the fly, her aching heart already comforted by the thought of her little Jess.

So by a strange over-ruling of Fate, husband, wife, and child, were reunited under the same roof; but to Mary in the bitterness of her sudden widowhood, it seemed like the harshest irony, that they should be together only when he was soulless, capable of no response to her love and tenderness.

The crowd dispersed quickly, when there was nothing more to be heard or seen, the

men to their work, the women to their homes. They were sobered by the shock of Lewin's death, baulked by Mrs. Schonk's continued absence, and in no mood for present violence; but they had neither forgiven nor forgotten, and the cause that had brought them there once, would bring them there again, when work was over.

When all had gone, and the last hoot from a boyish throat had died away in the distance, the woman whom they had been waiting for emerged from behind a hedge. Her strong frame was shaken by the passion which consumed her, for she had watched the whole proceedings. She knew that her house had been entered by the very people whom she had sworn to keep outside it; she knew that her prey had been stolen from her, just as she was on the point of reaping the proceeds of her inhumanity; she knew, for she had come from the White House, that her last support had given way, for Patrick Ford had broken his chain, and by forsaking, had defied her. In the bitterness of defeat she shook her strong fist at her foes,

although they were all out of sight ; and then, looking down at the dark patch on the dusty road, muttered fiercely : “ I wish Patrick Ford had died where that other man fell, with my curse upon his head ! ”

CHAPTER XII.

GONE.

MADGE MANNERS got home, she scarcely knew how ; for her brain was in a state of chaotic confusion. Her tender heart had been tried to the uttermost by the sight of small emaciated Jess ; and then, the shock of Lewin's death before her eyes had come as a crushing climax. The anxieties of weeks told upon her, and her nerves were already, before this last catastrophe, in a state of the highest tension. She walked up and down the drawing-room driven wild by the knowledge that her husband was coming home that very afternoon, and she would not know how to face him. She was alone, as it always seemed her fate to be when she most needed advice or sympathy.

Her sister had volunteered to lay all the facts of the case against Mrs. Schonk before Mrs. Templeton, in order that she might report them to her husband as soon as he came back from town. The Rector was detained by pressing business, which was the reason that Violet offered to go instead; and after a hasty luncheon for which she had not much appetite, and Madge none, she took the pony-cart and started off, saying that she would call round by the Park to see how Jess was, on her way home. Madge was only too glad to be rid of her, for the continual wearing of a mask was getting unbearable. Violet left her on the sofa, with a handkerchief soaked in Eau de Cologne on her forehead; but as soon as she was out of the house, Madge got up, feeling it impossible to keep still. Her thoughts went back to her talk with Fane in the garden at the Chase. He told her then that he had called at the Priory a day or two before, had been shown into the drawing-room by her maid, who thought that her mistress was at home, and that

whilst he was waiting for her to come in, his eye had fallen on a circular of Dorrien White & Co's. He had begged her to tell him if she had any dealings with that firm, as he was certain that they were a set of the greatest rascals that ever stepped, and she had only refused because Lewin had made her promise to say nothing to anybody about her business transactions, so long as they were under his superintendence. She had longed for his help, which seemed to her as welcome as a life-boat in a storm at sea, but truer to Lewin than he had been to her, she resisted the temptation, and kept her word. Godfrey Fane had been most kind, and most persistent; he had even told her of his suspicion that Dorrien White was no less a man than Osgood Lewin, but she had not believed him. It was not possible for her to credit Lewin with such a vast amount of duplicity, although she had an instinctive distrust of him. Now that he was dead—gone into the Land of Shadows with all his sins and shortcomings on his head, she tried to think no evil of him. She had

echoed the Rector's prayer, "God have mercy on his soul," but she felt that if there were rest for him, there was none for her. It was as if she had wandered, misled by a fog into a blind alley, from which there was no escape. She looked round the old, familiar room, in which she had spent so many happy hours, with the wild eyes of a hunted animal. Was there no escape? Her husband would probably come home about six—could nothing be done before he arrived? She looked at her watch—there was a train in a few minutes. It was just possible to reach Dorrien White's, and be back again, either by the same train as Hugh's, or else, if she were lucky, by the one before. No sooner thought, than carried into action. She caught up her hat, featherboa, and a pair of chevette gloves which were lying on a chair, where she had thrown them when she came in, being too tired to go up-stairs. Anne, surprised and reproachful, met her in the hall.

"You are never going out again, ma'am, when you seemed so dead beat?"

"I must, Anne—and I haven't one moment to catch the train," Madge said quickly, and hurried past her.

The parlour-maid shook her head and hastened into the kitchen to impart her anxieties to Elizabeth the cook. "I don't half like it," she said thoughtfully. "Missis was no more fit to go than I am to preach in a cathedral. She looked ready to drop, she did, and her eyes seemed scarcely to see me."

"And the Captain coming home! It do seem queer; but are you sure that it's town she's gone to?"

"Yes; she was in that hurry as if her life depended on her being off that minute. I do wish Miss Vilet had been here to stop her."

"Miss Vilet" didn't like it at all, when she came back from her drive to find her sister, whom she had left looking ill and white, and lying limply on the sofa, gone off to London without a word of explanation. The more she thought over it, the more anxious she grew. What could take her to

town on the very afternoon that Hugh was expected? It must be most urgent, pressing business, and yet she had gathered that nobody had been, and that no letter had arrived at the house during her own absence. Then like an inspiration it came to her, that she had gone to see Frank Wood about some affairs connected with money and speculation. She had not imagined that anything of the kind had been going on lately between them; but this seemed to be the only possible explanation of Madge's sudden visit to London. Major Marston had been quite alarmed about Madge, and said that she ought to be kept as quiet as possible, and now she was going about town—perhaps finding Mr. Wood out, and not knowing what to do with herself. She might be taken ill, and all sorts of horrible things might happen to her without a soul to take care of her—poor darling! The protective instinct was strong in Violet Fitzroy, as it is in many girls who have not been hardened by the world. It was impossible for her to stay there doing nothing, when her sister

might be in desperate need of her. If Madge had gone to Frank Wood's, she resolved to run her down. If she had not gone to him—a possibility she dared not face—she could at least ask his advice, and he would be sure to think of something to do. There was another thing she dared not face, and that was the look on her brother-in-law's face, if she were there to tell him that Madge was not at home, but loafing somewhere about London. She absolutely ran out of the house, dismaying Anne, who was just appearing with the brass tea-tray. She put down the tray, and threw up both her hands. "Well I never!" she exclaimed aloud as if she were declaiming before an audience, "what with sudden death, and two ladies behaving in this strange fashion, I shouldn't wonder a bit if Elizabeth and me took to having fits."

Violet was too disquieted in her mind to have any room for the slightest confusion at the boldness of her action. It was a London-bridge train that she caught by the fleetness of her legs, and when she arrived

at that gloomy terminus she jumped into a hansom without one minute's delay, and was congratulating herself on her speed, when she was promptly blocked on the bridge, and for several minutes of intense aggravation she could not advance an inch. Mr. Frank Wood was just picking up his well-brushed hat, with intent to depart westwards, when the door burst open, and before his astonished eyes stood the dainty form of Violet Fitzroy, clad in a bewitchingly simple costume of grey and white.

"Is my sister here?" she asked breathlessly, looking round the room with an eager glance, which explored every corner before it rested on his face.

"No; did you expect her? Has anything happened?" he asked quickly as he wheeled forward a chair.

She poured out her story as coherently as she could, only glancing off it for a moment to mention Lewin's fearful accident. Frank was dreadfully shocked, but as he gathered his wits together, he wondered if it could have

anything to do with Mrs. Manners' oddly timed visit to town.

"I thought perhaps you had been helping her as you did before," she said tentatively.

"No—not for a long time," he answered promptly, sensible that he had been quite oblivious of one sister whilst engrossed with the other, and feasting his eyes on the delightful sight of Violet Fitzroy seated in his own armchair. It would give a charm to his prosaic office which it certainly had never possessed before. At first he did not take in that there was any real cause for anxiety. Eva dashed up to town at any hour of the day, and nobody raised so much as an eyebrow about it ; but when the poor girl, in her craving for sympathy, poured forth all her cares and vague suspicions, aroused by Madge's strange manner the evening of the ball, as well as by the Major's words only that morning, his face grew long and grave.

"I hope to goodness Mrs. Manners hasn't got into the hands of some rascally outsider. She had nothing to do with Lewin, I suppose?" he said thoughtfully.

“Nothing,” Violet said emphatically, “she couldn’t bear him. But I am as certain as that I sit here that she has got into some scrape about money; and it is wearing her out, and I—I believe it will drive her mad,” the tears rushing into her eyes.

He got up from his chair, and stood beside her, leaning his back against his desk. “If it is only money, don’t worry yourself a bit.”

“But I can’t help it. Fancy if she has been deceived and drawn on! You know how her poor heart was set on this partnership for Hugh. She may have lost some of his money, and think how wretched that would make her!”

He could scarcely think of anything but the troubled face before him; but he kept himself in check, and tried to be as practical as possible.

“If it is only money,” he repeated, “that can be easily made straight.”

“I don’t see how,” dolefully, as she thought of her father’s limited finances.

“Promise not to think me awfully cheeky,” and then flushing slightly, but not waiting

for an answer, he went on to say that he had had a stroke of luck lately, six hundred pounds lying absolutely idle at the bank.

She jumped up from her seat, feeling hot all over. "Thanks ever so much—"

"You won't consider me as a friend?" reproachfully.

"Yes I do—I do—but Hugh would never forgive it."

"I forgot him," blankly. "I suppose he would have to know."

"Of *course* he would. Goodbye—I must be off."

She put out her hand and he took it, looking down into her face at the same time with eyes that tried to say all that his ready tongue wished to utter. No, it would never do to ask her then and there, it would be "real mean," as the Yankees say. It would be the most caddish thing possible to take advantage of her necessity; so with love urging him on and scruples drawing him back, he tried to keep his thoughts on the matter in hand. "What can I do for you?"

"I haven't an idea," sorrowfully. "I feel

inclined to tramp about London till I find her."

"You would lose yourself, and not find your sister; ten to one she will go back by the 6-10."

"Then I had better go to Victoria at once."

"Yes, and go home. I shall take you to the station," with quite an air of proprietorship, "and on the way there, we will settle what I can do."

On the way there, through a look, or a pressure of the hand, they had tacitly decided to spend the rest of their lives together; but they found it more difficult to settle what course Frank was to pursue in the search for his future sister-in-law. Unluckily they just missed the train by two minutes, and could not tell if Madge were in it or not. They tried to console themselves with this reflection, that if she had gone down, Violet would find her safe at home; and if not, they could not have chosen a better place to watch for her. Frank's warm sympathy was much to her, and helped to make the waiting bearable, but

Violet was spent with anxiety. All her brightness had withered away, and she could scarcely answer him or keep up any thread of conversation as her thoughts, like her eyes, were continually darting right and left for a tall figure clad in grey, with a large hat and a feather-boá. There were plenty of grey dresses, and innumerable feather-boas, but no sweet face with wistful eyes, such as she was looking for. What an ever-changing crowd it was, some arriving, others departing, all in a hurry! One girl in a *Henri Deux* cloak, with three capes to it, had apparently lost a bonnet-box, and was making as huge an outcry as if it were a jewel-box filled with diamond necklaces. Violet in her sad suspense wondered if she would have made as much fuss if she had lost a sister. Any article of dress seemed of such small account at the moment, that she herself could not have cared if her best hat had fallen under a steam engine. Frank tried to persuade her to have some tea, but she refused, though very thirsty, because she could not keep her eye on all passers-by in the refreshment-room. As a

last resource, he brought her a cup outside, and insisted upon her drinking it then and there. It refreshed her, and a few minutes later she was seated in the train hastening towards she knew not what. Pray God she might find Madge safe at home with Hugh, for she felt as if she *could* not meet him without her! Frank had enjoined her to telegraph to the Isthmian if he could be of the slightest service; but he was obliged to stay behind because of an engagement of such extra importance that he could not break it, even for the sake of escorting Violet Fitzroy home.

When the train slowed on entering Letherleigh station, Violet saw the sight she most dreaded—Hugh, browner and thinner than ever, scanning every carriage as it passed by with wildly eager eyes. She felt a longing to hide herself, but she had to step out, and face the question, “Have you seen her?” and the bitter disappointment in his tone as he added, “She isn’t with you?”

She shook her head as she grasped his hand in both of hers, the tears rushing to her eyes.

“She will come by the next, she is sure to come.”

“My God! must I wait till then?”—a silence, and then with a nervous grasp clutching her arm, he asked in a breathless whisper, as an awful fear flashed through his puzzled brain. “What is it? Not Frank Wood?”

Violet shrank back, the blood flying hotly to her cheeks. “*Hugh!*” she exclaimed in a tone of the sternest reproach, all her sympathy dried up in a moment.

“No, no, I never thought it,” he said hurriedly, and turned away.

CHAPTER XIII.

PAID OUT.

MRS. SCHONK was very busy that afternoon. After putting the baby in its cradle, and feeding it with a bottle, she took one or two carpenter's tools with her into the garden, and by their help removed, or rather loosened, two boards of the fence. By this means she had secured an unsuspected exit, which was nearly opposite to a gap in the park-paling. She was a woman given to infinite precaution, in spite of her reckless daring; and if she had the slightest suspicion of danger she spared no pains to avert it. Patrick Ford having deserted her, the whole structure of her supreme self-confidence gave way. Though she had no trust in God or man, she had a vast faith in the efficacy of a doctor's certificate. With this to shield her, she felt

equal to braving any amount of criticism—in a word, she knew she was safe, and though gossips might talk, and benevolent busy-bodies dance with rage, she could go on her way undisturbed. But without it, she was like a dog without its teeth. Every man's hand could be raised against her, every tongue could wag at its will ; and the wagging of tongues was fatal to the peculiar line of business she pursued. She liked to work in the dark, for she could scarcely go on at all if the full glare of publicity's lantern were turned upon Rose Cottage, and the doings which went on inside it.

That poor little waif, the baby, slept on through the long hours, unconscious of the movement about her, a piece of perfect innocence in that house of crime. She had not lifted up her voice when hidden behind the hedge, for Mrs. Schonk had given her a strong dose of cordial which had numbed her faculties, and silenced her crying powers. Fast asleep, happy as a dormouse in the winter, she lay there, whilst Mrs. Schonk bustled about, turning out drawers, and

tearing up papers. The three insurance-books, as well as Dr. Ford's certificate with that fatal word "Marasmus" on it, which has been the cloak for more hardened sins than any other, went into her large pocket. Most of Jessie's pretty things, provided by the loving hands of her mother, she had sold long ago; but the few that remained she put out on the table with a parade of honesty, carefully folded with the neatness that was habitual to her. And then, having done what was absolutely necessary, she went into the kitchen and cooked some meat. With her usual caution she made a substantial meal, laying by for the precarious future, as well as satisfying present needs. She longed to know what the parson was up to. It was possible that the death of that gentleman from the Park might have put everything else out of his head; but unless she knew this for certain, she could not feel secure. If that little brat refused to die, she would have a heap of things to say—things that would set every mother against her in the place; and when the women led the way,

the men were sure to follow. She was not afraid of any man, if he came alone, but a furious, yelping crowd, it was wiser to avoid than to meet. Her heart was still full to the brim of passionate rage against Patrick Ford for having gone away when she most wanted him—against Mrs. Lewis, who, if she had only turned up before, or sent in the money regularly, might have had her child back as healthy a little specimen as ever took an insurance-agent's heart by storm—against the Rector, who had business enough of his own with all the dirty, disreputable, idle, and drunken, and might just as well have let a respectable woman be, who never asked him for a penny, or gave him a bit of trouble by claiming any mortal service from him whatever—against the whole lot of ladies who took a fancy to the child out of spite, and made a conspiracy between them to rob a poor, hard-working woman of her living! She had nothing to hope for from George Fairfax. She knew him of old, a great friend of the Fords', and a man who would not turn a hairs-

breadth out of the straight line of duty to please the Queen herself. He had a sharp eye and a direct mode of speech, and if he had one look at Jess she could tell to a nicety what the verdict would be. And that was the thing she could not face. As soon as it was dark she would go. She must take the baby, and as many clothes as she could carry. All the loose cash that she possessed was already amongst the other precious things stored in her pocket. How she longed, like any other evil thing, for the darkness to come and cover her flight! The days in May are long, and this particular one seemed, to her fierce impatience, longer than any other. She wrapped the baby in its loose, grey cloak, put on her own bonnet and shawl, administered another dose of cordial to the child, and then went to the window to watch the sun set. When it went down behind that bank of clouds, the daylight would soon be gone, and she would go with it. Suddenly it came across her that she had nearly three-quarters of a sack of coals in

the cellar. It was impossible to leave them behind, and yet equally impossible to take them with her. They must be hidden till all this fuss had passed over, and she could come back to make use of them herself. She would never let them make a fire to warm any of her backbiters; so she set to work with a spade, to dig a large hole in the potato-bed, in which to bury them. She was encumbered with much clothing, and the weather was mild for the spring, so she found her task a heavy one; but spurred on by the thought that if she did not persevere, the coals for which she had paid hard cash, might be of use to some one else, she worked on till the perspiration streamed down her face. She was so engrossed, and the scraping of the spade made such a noise, that she failed to hear the tramping of many feet coming along the road. The first warning she had was when the quasi-silence was broken by a loud yell of execration, a yell so full-tongued that she realised with a sudden thrill of excitement more than terror, that a crowd of people had

taken possession of the front-garden. In one instant all her faculties were on the alert ; she threw down the spade, dashed into the house, caught up the baby and a large bundle, and was out again in the space of half-a-minute. In another, whilst stones were flying, windows crashing and doors nearly battered in, she gained the fence. Though she could hear them already clambering over the back-gate, she waited to replace the two boards in their former position, so that the flight might not be suspected till she was out of their reach. For one instant, she looked back at the house where she had plotted the death of two innocent children, listening to the angry shouts of the furious mob, as they called her by every detestable epithet they could think of. It was a righteous anger, the anger of outraged humanity, but she did not see it in that light, or if she did, it failed to excite the smallest answering pang of penitence. Her lip curled in scorn, her eyes flashed with a longing for revenge. Oh ! if she could only pay them back, decoy them into the house, close the doors and windows, set fire to

it, and see them all burnt to death in a trap! But at present, she must occupy herself with her own safety, there was no time for such a luxury as revenge. With the noise of tin kettles beaten in derision, and the shouts of men, and boys, as they yelled, "Bring her out;" "Murderess—hag—fiend of a woman!" "Lynching's too good for her;" "How about the baby? Have you killed her yet?" in her ears, she crossed the road with long strides, slipped through the gap with difficulty, and stood still for a moment breathless, uncertain how to proceed. It was pitch dark under the trees, and she could catch sight of no light in any direction. Her plan was to cut across a corner of the park, and pass into the road by the lower gate. When the road was gained she would decide, according to circumstances, as to whether she would venture to Letherleigh station, or walk several miles to Ashmore. But how to get to the road? The noise increased behind her, and goaded her on—the enemy had evidently forced their way into the back-garden. In another minute they

might suspect, find the loose boards, and come pouring over the road. She hurried on, much hindered by the load on either side, crash against the stem of an ash ; a branch struck her straight across her forehead, she caught her foot against a stump, and nearly fell. O what a fool she had been to waste all those precious hours of light, and wait for the dark. Hark ! another louder yell than all before—they were coming after her, she was convinced, and struggled on recklessly. She felt like a hunted fox with the hungry hounds close at his heels. Where had she got to ? She must have gone wrong. Would she never reach the clear space of open grass with the carriage drive beyond ?

The wood seemed to stretch out as if its borders were ever farther and farther away. It was like a nightmare to her—the branches which struck her, the trunks which got in her way, the briars which clung to her skirts, and tried to hold her back. What was that just in front of her ? A child's face, white and thin, with weird eyes ! She staggered forward with a cry that was half a groan—the

sweat gathering on her forehead, her teeth clenched. It was only a bareness on the trunk of a tree where the bark had been stripped off, but for a moment she thought it was the face of Ruth come to mock her in her hour of distress. "If she could come back, she would be certain to do it, just to spite me!" she reflected grimly, and then she shifted the baby on to the other arm, and took the bundle in her left hand. "Now, I shall get on better." She went forward with a resolute step, but the sole of her foot found no footing—down she went—down into what seemed the bottomless pit, down into the bowels of the earth—alive into a grave, with the darkness closing round her like the wings of some bird of prey. Alone! for the baby was dead in her arms—stunned at first, because of the heavy thud with which she had fallen on her head, but waking after many hours to a perfect agony of pain; for in her fall she had broken her right arm and her right leg, and was lying with her full weight thrown on both the disabled limbs—desperate, because when it came to her slowly

that she was in the disused saw-pit, she knew that it was avoided by man, woman, and child, because of the ghost of the dead game-keeper which was supposed to haunt the spot. There she might lie till the pain in its intensity, in its slow, gnawing, grinding agony put an end to her life, and if the strong vitality that was in her resisted the ravages of pain, there was the spectre of starvation to scare her. Starvation! a cold shiver ran through her, her whole self rose in revolt against it. Starvation was what the fools died of, the helpless loafers, who could not do a whole day's work if they had the chance. Arabella Schonk, who never was afraid of work, was not the sort of person to die of that. Let her get out of this hole, and she would soon be her sturdy independent self again, ready to battle with her old strength, her old defiance, against the world. But, oh, God, the pain—the pain! She drew her brows together and clenched her teeth. Her brain began to wander, and all the list of sins she had committed through the years rose up like ghosts to mock her;

the worst was Ruth, as something very near a skeleton, stretching out bony arms to show the bruises on them, pointing with skinny finger to an almost fleshless temple to display the scar upon it, and asking, "How do you like it yourself? It's very nice to starve, isn't it? It's very nice to rot in a hole, and go to hell?" And then came Jess in her little nightgown, just as she was when fastened to that chair, "You wouldn't let me go, you cruel woman, and now you can't stir yourself—you tried to kill me, but now you've got to die instead—to die, to die!" Trying to get away and hide herself from those mocking childish eyes, the wretched woman moved an inch or two, and the broken bones in leg and arm crunched one against the other. The torture was great, and she who had the strength of will and nerve to make others endure, had no endurance on her own account. She gnashed her teeth in rage at the pain, and the helplessness of her position; and curses as wild as ever soiled the lips of a foul-mouthed man, broke on the chill morning air from

that writhing form at the bottom of the saw-pit. And oh, how deadly cold was all the upper part of her ; whilst the right side felt hot as hell-fire underneath, wherever the broken bones were pressed against the earth ! If she could but move ! Oh for the power just to turn herself over, so as to ease this racking pain ! But with the first effort she fainted away, and lay for some hours unconscious, her face with its strongly marked features looking far more ghastly than that of the dead baby lying on her arm. Death was a real angel of mercy to the child, taken from all pain and peril into everlasting peace, a little soul rescued from certain misery and possible vice, and planted in perfect safety in the garden of God !

When Mrs. Schonk opened her eyes, she felt heavy rain-drops pattering down on her unprotected face, whilst the birds were singing in joyful chorus, their spirits undamped by the spring-shower. What a mockery there seemed to be in their joyous song, as they flew from branch to branch, going to any spot they favoured most, with the blessed

freedom of their unfettered wings ; whilst she lay there like a forgotten log, sawn off from its parent stem, and left to rot. Left to rot ! A very nice end for an active woman, with unfinished plans for making money still running through the tangle of her thoughts ! A very nice end for a woman who had denied the existence of a God, and yet had a firm belief in a devil, who laughed at the popular idea of a heaven, and yet had a rooted conviction of a hell for others, and if for others, why not for herself ? She shook her head with fierce impatience ; she was not going to die just yet. It required rather more than a fall into a saw-pit to put an end to Arabella Schonk. With her uninjured hand she clawed at the side of the pit, digging her fingers deep into the raw earth, and then with all her remaining strength, and the immense power of her iron will she tried to raise herself up, but there was *no response in her body*. Then for the first time something very like despair came over her indomitable spirit ; for her experience as a nurse told her that the strange inertness in her whole being

could only come from some injury to the spine. A horrible shiver ran through her, as she realised the staggering fact, that of her own initiative she could never get out of that hole, and if nobody chanced to pass that way, that pit *must* be her grave !

It is useless to dwell on the agonising hours that crept by with a deadly slowness. Her shawl, dress and underclothing were soaked through by the persistent rain. There was no escape from it. She seemed a target for every sort of evil. For half an hour at a stretch she would call out with all the power left in her lungs, but the sound was deadened by the depth of the pit, and her voice was so hoarse that it could not reach far. " Help ! help ! help ! " the gasping cry of a woman in her despair, rang out but feebly in that unfrequented corner of the park, and no one answered ; and then for ages which seemed endless, she listened for a footstep, but none ever came.

The nasty unclean insects that crept out of the wet earth, and crawled over her, the worms that wriggled in long, slimy tracks

over the folds of her shawl, the rabbit that lost its footing as she had done, and came tumbling headlong down upon her face. How her eyes followed it with bitter envy, as, light-footed and nimble, it scurried up the bank, and went away to hide its scared self in some safe burrow. To think that useless little beast could go where it liked, and do what it liked, whilst she must lie there without the power to move a yard, she who had always prided herself on her activity, she who had always been so capable both in mind and body—Oh! it was maddening—maddening! She cried out again, a hoarse cry, more like that of some hunted animal than of a woman, and the cry was heard by a kitchen-maid, who was late on her return from her holiday, and took the short cut which she hated much, in hopes of avoiding the reprimand which she hated still more. She heard that hoarse cry, and with every nerve quivering, fled with the speed of terror to the house, spreading the report that the ghost of the dead gamekeeper was haunting the wood, and she had heard his moans.

For five long days and six long nights, Arabella Schonk lay in her death-trap. Mental torture was added to physical pain, and as she lay there in the darkness, fainting from want of food, as well as from ceaseless pain, gasping with a sickening thirst, that seemed a worse torture than all the rest, her brain was distracted once more by visions of all whom she had injured. There they all were, calling out in judgment against her; even Patrick Ford joined the others, and cried aloud, that she had ruined his soul. And what of hers? She was dying—she could fight against it no longer, straight before her stretched the gulf of Death—and what was waiting for her on its further shore? Nothingness—or Hell? Fiercely she rebelled against either. She could not be nothing, like a thing that had never been. She could not face death, judgment, and hell. No! she had always denied that there was a God to judge. Why should the belief rise in her now—*now* to crush her more entirely? Had she made a fearful mistake? Was it God who had put

her in this awful position, because she had always escaped the justice of man?

A creeping horror ran through her, a sneaking doubt, but she would not give way to it. To give way, was to acknowledge herself a fool from the beginning—to give way would be to know that she was now going to meet the punishment for her sins—to give way would mean that the parson was right and she was wrong, horribly, hopelessly, senselessly wrong from the first. Her strength had declined into helpless weakness, but there was a wretched rag of pride left, and she made a shield of it, for want of a better. "No, there is no God, and I know it," she gasped out, and they were the last words she ever said with her parched tongue and fevered lips. One sense left her after another, the morning song of the birds she only heard as a confused jumble of distant sound. The delicate frond of fern which she had watched day after day, growing in the damp soil on the side of the pit, lost all its delicate tracery, and became nothing more than a smudge. One thought merged into

another, one horror grew into another ; but through it all—the pain—the fearful pain went on unto the end. When sight and hearing had both gone, through all the chaotic confusion of her brain there was one abiding note which never altered—despair. There was terror in her fearless eye, terror in her strong, brave heart, and, if she could, she would have sunk deeper and deeper into the earth, cowering away from the cold clutch of the hand of Death. But Arabella Schonk was conquered at last, by One that is infinitely stronger than the strongest of us all ; and as her heart gave its last quivering throb, amongst the frogs, the worms, and all the nasty, crawling things at the bottom of that loathsome grave, all the wrong she had done to the innocent and helpless was most amply avenged.

CHAPTER XIV.

DOUBTS AND FEARS.

CAPTAIN MANNERS and Violet Fitzroy walked slowly back from the station after the latter's fruitless journey to town. Taking into consideration all the aggravating circumstances of the case, there was real cause for alarm. It was now eight o'clock, and neither could conceive any possible reason for Madge to stay in London unless something dreadful had happened to her. Hugh questioned Violet closely, and she told him everything. But the whole only served to increase his fears and send him nearly wild with anxiety. Supposing that some urgent necessity had driven Madge up to town, she would certainly have hurried back as fast as a train could bring her, in order to welcome him home after his long absence. He contrasted

this with the other time, when he had thought her too much occupied with Frank Wood to attend to him. With what a burst of passionate tenderness she had thrown herself into his arms, when she discovered him standing in the doorway! Oh, if he could only look into her dear face now, and know that she was safe! It would be better than any amount of money—ininitely better than a partnership with Rothschild himself.

At the gate of the Priory, Major Marston and Seagrave were talking to the Rector. When they caught sight of Hugh, they congratulated him on his return, and the Hussars told him that they had just been to call on Mrs. Manners, and to inquire after her health. "Shouldn't have thought she was up to going to town," the Major said tentatively, with a quick look at the two anxious faces before him.

"I don't suppose she was," Hugh answered gravely, not disposed to discuss his wife even with his old friends.

"Awful shock to any woman's nerves," Seagrave muttered, awed by Violet's silence,

and Hugh's repressive manner. And then having explained that they had only stayed on at the Park to keep up Miss Grenville's spirits—"inquest to-morrow, you know, and she feels creepy—" they hurried away, knowing that they would be late for dinner.

"What's up?" Seagrave wondered with genuine concern, as they went along.

"Gone off her nut—that's about it," the Major said sadly, as he flicked off the head of a thistle. "To think of the *creatures* who keep it up to the last, and she was about as good as they make them!"

"Then you don't believe she's gone to town?"

"Not a bit of it—first lie that came into the servant's head. Raving, most likely—locked up in her room—Great Scot, to think of it!" with a sort of gasp—as he remembered her only that morning.

The Rector felt privileged to stay, when the others went off. "What is it, Manners?" he said urgently.

"I know no more than you do," Hugh said hopelessly as he led the way into the

house, Violet walking silent and dejected by his side. He told all there was to tell, and Lindsay felt like the other two, completely nonplussed.

"I was just coming to tell her what I thought would please her so much," he said with a sigh. "The new doctor, Mr. Fairfax, says that little Jess may recover with good nursing and plenty of nourishment."

"I am so glad," Violet said fervently; "and this will be the best bit of news to tell Madge. She was so wrapped up in the child."

"Mrs. Schonk's?" Hugh asked listlessly.

"Yes, the clearest case of starvation that he ever saw—quite sufficient grounds for an arrest; but Templeton says we shall never prove it to the satisfaction of a jury."

"With that scoundrel, Ford, out of the way, and this other man to back you up, I think you may."

"Dr. Ford has been better of late," Violet put in gently.

"He has a lot of lee-way to make up," Hugh said gruffly, and then relapsed into

silence, staring into the fire, which Anne had made of roasting proportions, in order to express her sympathy.

There was a long pause, during which the wretched husband pictured Madge being knocked down, and run over by a heavy omnibus, as she was hurrying across the busy thoroughfare by Victoria Station. Mr. Lindsay's voice roused him to renewed uncertainty. "Do you think that this could have anything to do with Lewin's death?"

"Nothing; she simply detested him."

"But on the night of the election-dinner, she had a most earnest talk with him," he persisted, as he followed up the vague suspicion in his mind. "You weren't here, I think?" turning to Violet. "Fane was one of those who noticed how ill she looked, and tried to break it off."

"With Lewin? I can hardly believe it, she thought him such a cad."

"Did your wife ever speculate?"

"Just a trifle, but never with him."

"You are sure that she never went in for the Nanomana diamond mines?"

"She wouldn't dream of doing such a thing without asking me," he insisted from the depths of his own unconsciousness.

"They've come down with a crash, and numbers of people are ruined. It was only a passing thought."

"I shall go up to town by the next train," Hugh said after another long pause. The conviction that Madge had met with an accident had grown upon him, and he meant to go to Scotland Yard and have a message sent to all the hospitals within a reasonable distance.

"I will come with you," the Rector said promptly. "I must be off now about this warrant, but you'll find me at the station."

"Why should I trouble you?"

"My dear fellow, I'm almost as much interested in your wife as you are yourself," with one of his kindly smiles. "My model parishioner, as Mrs. Lindsay calls her."

Two policemen armed with a warrant went to Rose Cottage to find it empty, with every pane broken, every flower and vegetable trampled under foot. The crowd had

dispersed, and silence had fallen on the desolate house ; but they had left their mark behind them, as the missing woman had left her mark on the lives of the three children. Whilst the police were trying to enforce the claims of justice without success, Captain Manners and the Rector were equally baffled in their efforts to find the unfindable Madge. As they started without the smallest clue to her probable whereabouts, they were bound to fail ; but it was none the less heart-rending. They found Frank Wood at Victoria, staring at a placard which stated the "Sudden death of Mr. Osgood Lewin," and the "Failure of the Nanomana Mines" on the same sheet. He could not divest himself of the idea that these two events had something to do with Mrs. Manners' disappearance ; and as soon as he could get away, he had gone to Arundel Street only to find a closed door, and an infuriated crowd of shareholders standing outside, impotent, impecunious, and implacable.

It told well for Madge Manners that none of the three men, her husband, pastor and

friend, had the smallest suspicion of any wrong-doing on her part. To an unprejudiced observer it looked as if a consciousness of guilt had driven her from her home to avoid a meeting with her husband, but Hugh's only idea after that first moment of bewilderment was that she was lying in a helpless state in the accident ward of a hospital ; and as to the motive of her hurried visit to town he could not frame the smallest suggestion. There was a simple straightforwardness in his own nature which kept him from being prone to suspect others ; and whenever he had given his complete trust, it took a great deal to kill it. Even Frank and the Rector in their utter mystification had no doubt of her honour or integrity. There must have been some mistake somewhere, some fatal deluding error ; but when the clouds were dispersed, she would come back to them, the same pure high-minded woman, whom they had honoured as well as loved. Eva Grenville on the other hand doubted, and rejected the doubt, every alternate quarter of an hour. The full-blown report had come to

her through her maid, who returned from a necessary shopping expedition in Letherleigh with more than her ordinary speed, in her hurry to impart the news to her mistress. To some people there is no choicer delight than the telling of bad news, and Julia was one of these. Eva had been devoting herself to the nursing of little Jess, though the *rôle* did not come naturally to her. She was glad to get away from her thoughts, as far as possible from that silent room in the West wing where Osgood Lewin was lying in the stillness of death. His wife, not yet recovered from her severe illness—broke down completely, and fell across the small white bed in which her child had been lodged, utterly collapsed. She was put to bed in the next room, and the heiress installed herself in the mother's place, longing to do something for somebody, as she could do nothing for herself. She seemed quite a different creature from the proud, high-spirited girl brimming over with youth and vitality, of a few days before. She had lost her self-confidence and a large fraction of her self-respect, by accepting a man like

Lewin. It was an outrageous thing to do, and she could scarcely believe that she had ever done it; and yet she knew it was true. As she looked at Mary's wan face, and Jessie's fragile body, she guessed that all the sorrows of their lives must have come upon them through him, and yet in a moment of madness she had promised to be his wife! Now he was dead, and she was free. Free? Yes indeed, never really shackled, for his wife was living all the time, and his offer was nothing but an insult and a crime. The colour rushed in a crimson wave over her white forehead, and then Jessie stirred uneasily, and she had to give her whole attention to *his* child. There was much against Jess at present, for her name was Lewin, and Madge Manners whom Eva had once loved, but against whom she was infuriated at the moment, had made the child her special pet. Still there was such an irresistible appeal in the little thin face, and the large blue eyes, that all her natural tenderness was called forth, and she was thankful to be able to wait on her, feed her with soup or milk, pour out

her medicine, and shake up her pillows, until the nurse who had been sent for arrived. And then, just as she was in a saddened and chastened state of mind, her maid came in on tip-toe and told her the startling news that Mrs. Manners had run away!

There was an instant revulsion of feeling, eyes and lips hardening. If she had run away, it could only be with Godfrey Fane; and she, Eva Grenville, had been hoodwinked and tricked by these two men at the same time, and in an almost equally audacious fashion. Her eyes flashed with passionate rage, her heart felt ready to burst with scorn and indignation. Madge, the model of all the womanly virtues, the pattern-wife, the Rector's vaunted favourite—Madge who had been pining visibly for her husband during the last few weeks, Madge who was supposed to walk like an angel through all the wickedness of the world, with unsoiled feet!

Could it be true? The doubt was bad enough before, but the certainty was absolutely crushing. She sent away her

maid, who was bubbling over with her budget of news; but Eva felt that she could listen to no more. She sat down in a large armchair by the fire, resting her elbow on her knee, her soft round chin on her palm. It seemed to her as if an earthquake had shattered love, friendship, trust, and everything, and that she was stranded, high and safe—but oh! so desolate—on some rock away from everybody! Long she sat there, brooding gloomily, till she was roused by a rustle of the bed-clothes, and a faint, plaintive cry for “Mummy.” She got up at once, and in her ministrations to the little helpless child found some sort of balm for her own wounded feelings, if only in this way, that they turned her thoughts from herself to another, at least for a time.

At the long weary dinner, during which she sat opposite to her father in pre-occupied silence, her longing to know the truth gathered in intensity, and before dessert she had resolved to satisfy it. She might not be wanted when she got there, but go she must, and as soon as her father was

called away to settle some necessary arrangements about the inquest or the funeral, she sent round to the stables and ordered the brougham.

CHAPTER XV.

IN HER GREAT DESPAIR.

A SLIGHT figure, dimly outlined in all its youthful grace against the dull, grey sky, stood on the margin of a pool, leaning against the stem of a young maple, as if it scarcely had the strength to support itself. Whilst those who loved her were looking for her amongst the uninterested crowds of busy London, here was Madge Manners alone in the gathering shadows, barely a mile from the shelter and comfort of home, desperately in need of both, and yet wilfully keeping away. Of all the hours that had passed since she left Letherleigh, she could have told you nothing. She did not remember how she had hurried up to that office in Arundel Street, meeting a man in the doorway who was Harris himself in the act of absconding with

his ill-gotten gains in his pocket-book ; how she sat for hours in the inner-room, admitted by the boy in charge because he thought she was going to drop down in a dead faint at his feet ; how she sat there waiting for the man who had turned his back on the place for ever, whilst the boy tore up papers, and made a holocaust of heaps of documents in the fire which had been lighted for that very purpose, and chatted to her all the while in the quasi-patronising style of a sharp Cockney, glad to get an auditor who did not bother him with questions ; how she found herself afterwards on the embankment, jostled by passers-by whenever she stopped to watch the twinkling lights on the river, or to collect her scattered thoughts ; how she sat down on a bench because her legs refused to carry her any further, and after an interval was scared away from her needed rest by the insolence of a scoundrel out on his prowl ; how she fled aimlessly eastwards, till out of the chaos of her thoughts a definite purpose grew and grew in the ferment of her brain ; how she felt that she must get away from these eyes that stared,

these feet that seemed always pursuing, get away into the quiet of the country where there would be no hurry, no noise, no crowd to come between her and her purpose; how she thought of a quiet pool in a neighbour's grounds not half-a-mile from the south-western station at Letherleigh, where she could lay down her young life as a sacrifice for sin, and hide away from her husband for ever; how she made her way at last through the kindly guidance of a policeman, by perplexing streets that she had never trod before, to Waterloo, a line that she never used; how she ensconced herself in the corner of an empty carriage, and would have dropped to sleep from utter weariness if it had not been for the thoughts that bewildered her brain, and allowed her no mental peace; how when she reached Letherleigh she slunk past the station-master like a thief, and hurried straight on down the road, looking neither to right nor left in her wild hurry to get out of sight of every recognising eye; how she found the gate she was looking for, and cut straight across the dewy grass which chilled her feet and soaked

the edges of her skirts, and breathlessly reached the goal which was the object of her desire. Then with a sigh of utter weariness she leant against the tree to regain her breath, and to gather together her fast failing strength. It seemed as if half a life-time already separated her from the events of the morning. She turned her head and looked with a long-lingering look towards a clump of trees which hid the Priory from her longing eyes. Hugh is there, asking for his wife—not understanding at all that she will never come. He loves her still—he thinks her the dearest, the best of women; the corners of her mouth drooped, tears came slowly into her despairing eyes; but, oh God, if he knew! She clasped her hands tight till the jewels in her rings dug painfully into her fingers, and turned away—away from home and love, and life, to the cold silence of the pool. If she went back to him now and told him that she had robbed him, robbed him whilst he was working for them both in hated separation, he would cast her off, despise and loathe her. Ah!

what it would be to see the love die out of his eyes, to hear it go out from his voice. Better a thousand times to lie down there, safe under the quiet waters, safe from the altered sound of his voice—safe from the new reproach in his eyes, where nobody would ever know that one—Madge Manners—had gone to sleep. When he called, and she never answered, when he looked for her, and she never came, he would know that she must be dead, and then surely—*surely* he would forgive. She put her hands before her eyes and tried to pray, but no holy words would come. She saw Lewin with the ghastly greyiness of death on his face, but saying as urgently as ever, “Give me more, it is your only chance.” She saw Hugh with the old kind look in his eyes, calling out, “Come back! come back,” and stretching out his arms to take her in their close embrace, but pushed violently back by the other. Forgotten scraps of conversation sprang up in the turmoil of her mind to worry and bewilder her—Mrs. Schonk, grim and defiant, was turning her out of her

house ; her husband was scolding her far more angrily than he had ever done in real life about Frank Wood's repeated visits ; and again she was pleading with Lewin—pleading hopelessly, despairingly, whilst he laughed in her face. Money, money—all for money, she had sold her peace, her home, her husband for it, and now it was gone—gone like the days of last year. It was gone, and she had emptied heart and life for nothing ! She looked round, the tall rushes rustled in a gentle breeze, the moon sailed slowly out from a lump of clouds and touched the tender foliage of the young trees, and lay like an angel's smile upon the waters. A waterfowl startled from its sleep, took a short flight and dropped back into its nest amongst the rushes. That bird had its nest, but she was a poor hunted creature without a home ! She pressed her hands to her throbbing temples—she must get away, she was too near that dear little house amongst the trees. Hugh would be coming—she thought she heard a step, she gave a scared look over her shoulder—saw nothing but a stretch of

shadowy fields, with here and there a group of trees, and a vast expanse of gathering night—waited a moment to recover her breath, which came in deep-drawn gasps from her chest. “It is the only way,” she said hurriedly, her voice sounding strange in the silence—“I must hide!—hide!—It is the only way. Oh, God, it is so cold,” shivering in spite of the warmth of the soft night air—“so cold, but I mustn’t wait.” Then she stretched out her arms, as if in wild appeal to Heaven, and with a sob of farewell to all she loved, fell forward into the water.

The bubble splashed high towards the unresponsive sky, and at the same moment Godfrey Fane rushed breathlessly from under the trees. He had seen her get out at the station, and catching sight of the strange expression on her face, by the sight of a gas-lamp as she passed by it, made up his mind at once to follow her and see her safe home. To his knowledge she had never come down from Waterloo before, whilst he usually did, as the station was nearer the Chase. To his surprise, instead

of turning to the left, which was the way to the Priory, she had gone straight on down the road. Imagining that there would be no difficulty in catching her up, he stopped to give directions to his groom who was there with his horse, and also to a fly-man whom he told to hang about within call, as from what he had seen of Madge, he was sure that she was at the last tether of her strength. This done, he started in pursuit, but though his long legs took him fast down the road, he could not see her anywhere. After a while he retraced his steps, for common-sense told him that unless she had run like a lamp-lighter, she could not be anywhere in front. Then he caught sight of the open gate, and remembered with a pang the lonely piece of water beyond the fields where they used to skate in the winter. His heart sank with a sudden fear, and he dashed forward like a madman. On across the damp, slippery grass, which had never seemed half such a wide stretch before—on with the thoughts of Hugh's despair if he got there too late, spurring

him to greater speed—on till the belt of trees was gained, and in between their stems he caught a glimpse of a woman's figure standing close to the water's edge. She could have come there at night but for one purpose, driven to her death by an inexorable despair; and knowing that life and death depended on his haste, he dashed forward, to find himself alone upon the bank, with an ever-widening ripple ruffling the smooth surface of the pool.

He tore off his coat, and sprang into the water. Clutching hold of one extended arm, he dragged her with all his strength from the firm embrace of clinging weeds, and with some difficulty got her close to the bank, and presently landed her gently on the turf. A moonbeam fell across the deathly whiteness of her lovely face, water streamed from her hair, her hat, every particle of her dress, whilst her feather-boá trailed like a limp snake along the grass. In the deep silence, he heard the loud throbs of his own heart. She could not be dead, and yet she looked too fearfully like it. She was alive one

minute and a half ago, and one minute and a half's immersion could not have drowned her. It could scarcely have deprived her of consciousness, and yet she was so still, so appallingly still. He had no convenient flask in his pocket, such as men always produce at the right moment in novels, and the best thing he could do would be to take her as quickly as possible to the home and the husband from whom she had tried so desperately to escape. What could it be that had driven her out from the home of which she was so proud, away from the husband whom she absolutely adored? The mystery seemed inexplicable, but Fane's heart was full of the tenderest compassion, as he raised her in his arms. There was nothing for it but to carry her down to the road, put her into the fly, and get her home if possible before she revived. If she roused up sufficiently to implore him not to take her back, his position would be terribly unpleasant, friendship to his old chum pulling him one way, chivalry to a woman dragging him in the contrary direction. Poor old Hugh, only arrived that

very day ! what a shock and a sorrow this would be to him, the best and most devoted of husbands ! She could not be dead, he told himself so, again and again, as he looked down on the small white face resting with such pathetic helplessness on his shoulder ; but a dreadful doubt pursued him across the dreary length of the fields, and it seemed an hour at least before he reached the road. He was thankful indeed when the fly came up, after he had whistled for it several times, and still more thankful when they were landed at last at the door of the Priory. He put a sovereign into the driver's hand, and said in a low voice : " The lady lost her way, and fell into the water."

" All right, sir," the man replied, with round eyes full of wonder and curiosity.

There was no time for more, for at the sound of wheels out rushed Violet, whose ears had been on the alert all the evening, followed by Anne and Elizabeth. As she saw Fane's grave face, and looked from him to the figure, indistinctly seen, but evidently motionless in the corner of the fly, the power

of speech forsook her ; shaking all over, she could only lay her hand upon his sleeve and look up into his face, with an eager question in her eyes.

“Your sister has had an accident,” he said gently, thinking of the servants behind her ; and added hastily, as she turned white with a terrible fear, “Not a serious one, I hope. Where’s Hugh?”

“In London, looking for her.”

“Then show me her room ; we must get her there at once, and the fly can fetch a doctor. Which one will you have?”

“Mr. Fairfax, he is the nearest ; but we always have Dr. Smith from Dorking.”

“Let us have the nearest. We can send for the other afterwards.”

“But, Mr. Fane, what is it?” imploringly. “Your things are all wet. What *does* it mean?”

His head was in the fly, as he took Madge once more in his arms, and he did not answer at first, but as he heard the water still dripping from her skirts, as he carried

her through the hall, he said briefly : " Your sister lost her footing, and fell into some water. Rather a good thing that I happened to be there."

Violet turned a shade paler, but said nothing, understanding with a cold shiver down her spine, that her sister had tried to commit suicide, and that Fane had saved her.

As he laid Madge down on the sofa, he said, " You must put her between warm blankets, and make her as hot as possible."

Then he went to the door, and beckoned to Violet to come to him. She came with Madge's wet hat in her hand, whilst Anne and the cook gathered round their mistress sobbing aloud, instead of getting everything ready.

" Where can I find Hugh ?" he asked quickly.

Violet looked bewildered. " I don't know. I was to have sent him a message by the guard of the next train."

" Then he must come to Victoria to fetch

it, and I will meet him there ; my man can go on to Dorking."

"How can we ever thank you?"

"No need," and he went off, knowing that she was on thorns to return to Madge.

CHAPTER XVI.

“WHY DID YOU DO IT?”

FANE went slowly down the stairs, thinking deeply as he went. How much had happened in the course of a few hours! enough to change the tenor of ever so many lives. Madge Manners, as good a girl as ever existed, driven on by some indefinable impulse, had rushed headlong to her death, like some sin-stained coward who has not the courage to face the consequences of his own actions. Nice piece of news to carry to her husband, just arrived after a long absence, brimful with the joy of seeing his wife's pretty face again, after all those dreary weeks! If he had been the greatest brute amongst living men, she could not have dealt him a crueller blow; and yet she loved him, there was not a doubt of it, with all the strength of

her passionate young heart. Oh the folly of it! And then there was Eva Grenville, almost as great a puzzle, though in quite a different line. If there was anything of which he felt as certain as of his own existence, it was that she cared for him, Godfrey Fane, a thousand times more than he deserved. And yet, on the very evening when he had made up his mind to ask her to be his wife, she had accepted a man who was an utter cad, and who had "scoundrel" written on every line of his detestable face. What had driven her to her ruin he could no more guess than he could imagine what had impelled Mrs. Manners to that pool in Mr. Greenfield's grounds. Although he had studied these two girls with the attention which a man often bestows on his friend's wife, and always gives to the girl he intends to make his own, they had both completely baffled him. Madge Manners was evidently suffering from incipient brain fever, which would render her irresponsible for her own actions, but Eva Grenville was in splendid health with all her faculties in full play. For her extraordinary

conduct there could be no possible excuse. She must have acted on one of those surprising impulses which made the danger of her character, and as he tried to tell himself in his cooler moments, perhaps he was well out of it. An impulse might have seized her to run away from home and husband, and before another impulse brought her back, the name of Fane would have been the subject of a horrid scandal. Yes, he ought to congratulate himself on his escape. As the thought passed through his brain, he stepped down into the hall, and found himself face to face with the girl from whom he was so very glad to escape. There stood Eva Grenville with a crimson cloak hastily thrown over her evening dress of black lace, bare-headed, the wind from the open door ruffling her dark curls, an expression of almost fierce anxiety on her white face. Anxiety gave way to startled surprise as she saw him. Utterly bewildered, her lips opened, but no words came. He had not run away with Madge, it was all a lie, a base lie. Her heart gave a wild throb of joy ; whilst Fane stood perfectly

silent, enraged by the thought that this girl in all her beauty, with her wild undisciplined but generous nature, was to have been sacrificed to that mean-spirited cur, Osgood Lewin. Death had saved her, but the sin was just the same on her side.

"Where's Madge?" she asked in a hurry, as he seemed to be going to pass her.

"Upstairs—very ill—excuse me, but I must send this man for the doctor."

"Don't go without telling me something!" forgetting everything else in her anxiety.

He gave directions to the cabman, and came back. Under his dry coat, his things were soaking wet, but he was not the sort of man to think of his own discomforts when a woman was waiting for him. They had the hall to themselves, for the servants were with their mistress, and assisting Violet. The grating of the retreating cab wheels on the gravel was the only sound that broke the silence. Her thoughts flew from one extreme to the other—his presence in this house told of his guilt, on the other hand it proved his innocence. He was Madge's

secret lover, he was Captain Manners' truest friend. Which was the truth? She could not tell, and yet she *must* know. The imperative necessity drove her on, and utterly did away with any embarrassment in speaking to Fane. He was wondering, amongst the unusual bewilderment of his brain, how much he was at liberty to tell; but he soon came to the conclusion that the wisest course would be to say the simple truth, lest a perverted version should reach her ears. At the same time he meant to volunteer nothing. She it was who had placed a wall between them; and as he leant against the side of the small archway which broke the straight line of the hall, he determined that she should be the one to take the initiative of stretching over it—and not he.

"She was not ill this morning," she began tentatively.

"She was not herself last night," gravely.

"Last night?" eagerly. "I did not notice anything."

"No?" with a deep significance in the crude negative.

The colour rushed to her cheeks, and she flew from yesterday to to-day in a hurry. "But what has happened to her? Did she go to town?"

"She went to town, and she had an accident."

"And you were with her?" her jealousy on fire in a moment.

"I was not with her, or the accident would not have happened," slowly wondering at the intense interest in her tone.

"Was she run over—was she much hurt? Oh! say something quick?" clasping her hands in her eagerness.

"She was nearly drowned, but I got there in time to pull her out."

"Then you were there?" an instant change in the direction of her interest.

"Yes, I caught sight of her face when she got out of the train, and that was enough for me," pulling out his watch, and wiping it on his coat sleeve.

They had not gone up to town together. It was a mere accident that they happened to meet. These were the facts that impressed

themselves on her brain, almost to the exclusion of everything else. "There is no water near the station," she said as soon as she had time to take her thoughts from the man before her to the sick friend lying upstairs.

"No, but there is at Mr. Greenfield's!"

"Mr. Greenfield's?" in amazement; "but how did she get there?"

"On her feet, tired as she was. People suffering from brain fever don't measure distances over carefully."

"She fell in, oh good God!" covering her face with her hands. In a moment Madge was her friend again, the friend whom she had petted and made much of, and only that evening she had nearly died, out there in the darkness hardly a mile from home. And she had loathed and reviled her, soiling her name with every foul epithet she could think of! And then like a flash it came to her that it was Lewin who had roused her suspicions and fanned them into flame. Perhaps to some it might seem that even now she had not much evidence to go on as to Fane's innocence; but she felt it instinctively. She

could not have been more thoroughly convinced of it, if he had sworn it to her on his word of honour. How small and mean her suspicions seemed, as she thought of the tragedy which had so nearly plunged that whole household into inconsolable sorrow ; and Madge had been saved, *not* ruined, by Godfrey Fane !

His heart was full of tenderness for her, as she stood before him, shivering with the horror of it, but he sternly repressed it. She had sinned too deeply to be forgiven too easily, and his voice was almost harsh as he said coldly, " I must be off."

" Off where ? " looking up with startled eyes.

" Off to meet Hugh by the next train, and break the news to him." He moved towards the door, picking up his hat from the stand as he went. He was already at the step, as he turned to wish her a ceremonious " Good evening," when he met her eyes fixed upon him with a look of intense longing in which her whole heart spoke out. He hesitated, all the pride of his nature striving to keep him

back, all the tenderness propelling him forward. With a few quick steps he was by her side once again. His face with an unusual flush upon it was bent towards hers. The question which he had been repeating for the last four and twenty hours pushed itself to the front, and almost involuntarily he found himself asking: "*Why* did you do it?"

"Because I was mad," she said with a deep breath, as her chest heaved passionately. "I thought—"

"What did you think?" imperatively, because of his urgent wish to know, as his eyes fixed themselves upon hers inexorably.

"Oh, no matter what I thought," wildly, as she saw the impossibility of explaining; "it was an absurd—a monstrous mistake."

"A mistake about me?" in surprise.

"Yes, you," she gave one quick look up into his face, a look in which love and penitence, and a craving for forgiveness, were all expressed. It broke down the dam of his resolution with the force of a flood, and the next moment, before he knew what he was doing,

he stooped his head and kissed her. Then as the tall old grandfather's clock struck ten, he dashed out of the house, sprang upon his horse, and went at a hand-gallop towards the station.

Eva, left alone in the silent hall, dropped down into a high-backed chair, and burst into a hysterical flood of tears ; for her happiness had come to her so unexpectedly, where she had braced herself to meet an almost unendurable sorrow—that in the sudden revulsion of feeling, she seemed to have lost her balance. It seemed weird and unnatural that this great joy should come to her, when the shadow of death was over one house, and the gloom of a great anxiety over another. Presently she picked herself up, and walking as if in a dream down the small carriage-drive, stepped into the brougham which was waiting, and went home—carrying her joy with her into the very house where Lewin lay dead. The incongruity of the whole situation struck her still more forcibly when she reached the Park, and she shivered from head to foot with a creeping chill, as she passed the door

of the corridor which led to the East wing. But when she was safe in her own bedroom, she hugged her happiness tight to her breast, and lay down to rest with the smile of hope upon her lips, after the despair of the night before.

CHAPTER XVII.

FORGIVEN!

HUGH MANNERS sat by his wife's bed-side worn with weary waiting and watching. As to what had brought on this terrible attack of brain-fever, he knew much, and guessed the rest. The money that was missing from the bank told part of the tale, whilst a letter from Madge which had been found in Lewin's pocket, supplied an important clue. There was no anger in his generous heart against his wife. She was so young—such a child of impulse, and her motives were so utterly pure. If she wanted money it was for him; not like that wretched woman Schonk, who in her fierce longing for a few pounds, thought only of herself. It must have been this idea of a partnership which had gained such a hold of her through

his long absence, and which had led her on under that scoundrel's tutelage, so much farther than she had intended. No doubt he had pledged her to secrecy, and that was why she would not confide in any of her friends. And when he heard her crying out : " Hide me—hide me—let me go—let me go and hide!" as if she were the worst of women—her sweet voice raised to a shrill crescendo—his innocent, childlike wife wanting to hide her guiltless head!—his heart nearly burst with useless rage against Osgood Lewin. How he must have played upon her tenderest feelings, tempting her on, step by step, through her love for her husband, deluding her with false promises, false hopes, false everything, till in her wild, bewildered misery there was no rest for her except in death. And the man was beyond his reach! He could not tell him to his face that he ranked him lower than a murderer; he could not thrash him till he broke his stick over his cowardly back. Whilst all the papers were dilating on the wreckage he had made of hundreds of lives,

whilst a loud and agonised cry of protest and execration, from the lips of the ruined and deluded victims, was rising up to Heaven, Osgood Lewin was lying in the churchyard at Letherleigh, and the beautiful service of the Anglican Church had been read over him, as if he were some saint laid to rest after a life of holiness, instead of a hardened sinner, cut down in the midst of his sins, hissed into the grave by the curses of all who knew him !

Side by side with this destroyer of human souls, lay all that was earthly (which to the cynical might seem the only part) of Mrs. Schonk—the cold-blooded destroyer of baby-lives. Both had failed when within touch of success—both had gone in a great hurry to another world for which they had not made the slightest preparation ; and yet they had both been fairly endowed with prudence and foresight.

Mrs. Schonk's body was found by a keeper whose dog had a keener scent than himself. Crowds gathered round the old saw-pit, for they thought it was a grand

sight to see the woman who had defied them all, lying like a dead rat at the bottom of a hole, but many women shed tears over the baby—the innocent suffering with the guilty. They thought it very hard, forgetting that it would be infinitely safer in Heaven where there would be no Mrs. Schonk to trouble it. Jessie, who was growing plumper and rosier every day, had no sentiment to spare for the dead woman. She hoped that they would shut her tight in the black box, and put a thick cord round it to prevent her ever getting out, and Eva, who spoiled her outrageously, gave her a kiss instead of a scolding.

Mr. Lindsay made Mary Lewin's peace with the Duchess, who, won over by the eloquence of her advocate, sent her a cheque, accompanied by her blessing; and Mary, who was always the most disinterested of mortals, actually prized the latter more than the former. Mr. Pulleyne, who had hitherto been as reserved as an unopened oyster, astonished the Grenvilles by the eagerness with which he came, day after day, to visit

the widow and fatherless, as exemplified by Mrs. Lewin and Jessie ; but their surprise changed into excited interest, when they learnt that he had discovered his long-lost Mary Douglas in the swindler's widow.

It seemed to Hugh Manners that everything was going well with everybody, with the exception of his poor little wife. Violet's hopes were budding like the roses in the garden, and would probably bloom into matrimony before the latter had fallen from their stalks.

Eva Grenville was going to disturb the even tenor of Fane's life, and make him either ten times happier, or twenty times more miserable. Jessie was throwing off every sign of her illness, and regaining all her lost beauty. Even Patrick Ford was climbing up, instead of sinking ever lower and lower. He had exchanged practices with George Fairfax ; and, having left his bad reputation behind him at Letherleigh, had started on a higher level at Bedford. The Rector was in very good spirits, hoping much from Fane's promised exertions in

Parliament, in favour of his long cherished project. The weather was unusually benign, and to Hugh's eyes the garden had never looked as pretty before. It seemed as if the roses had broken into richer bloom than ever, as if the river had left much of its mud behind it, in order to let its waters sparkle more brightly, when passing under the windows of the Priory, as if the birds were actually trying by their joyous chorus to rouse its mistress from her deadly torpor.

The moment came at last, when Madge looked into her husband's face with loving recognition in her large grey eyes. He bent over her and kissed her tenderly, his heart nearly bursting with joy, as he held her thin hands in his, afraid to speak, lest consciousness should fly away like a frightened bird. She shrank from him suddenly, as the storm-cloud of memory came quickly over her mind. "I oughtn't to be here," she said in the shaky tones of extreme weakness.

"This is your proper place, darling," gently, but firmly—dreadfully afraid of what would ensue from returning recollection.

She was shaking from head to foot with intense agitation, but still, with all the shattered remnant of her will, she clung to her idea of duty.

"You don't know what I have done," she said breathlessly.

"I know it all."

Her eyes, which had appeared so large before, seemed to swallow up the rest of her face—"You know that I robbed you?"

"No!" with grave decision. "There can be no question of that sort between you and me. You took some of our money for our benefit—yours and mine. You lost it; but we are no worse off than we were before we had it. So don't think of it again."

"Can you ever love me again the least little bit?" she asked wistfully, after a breathless pause.

"A thousand times more than ever—if possible," with a smile that glorified his worn face.

"You will forgive me, some day?" timidly, as if she scarcely dared to suggest it.

“ There’s nothing to forgive.”

She had taken his money, she had tried to kill herself—she had sinned against him so cruelly ; but in his grand generosity all these sins were blotted out. As she realised this, a heavy weight was lifted off her heart, and as the happy tears rolled down her wasted cheeks, she whispered — “ I don’t want to die now.”

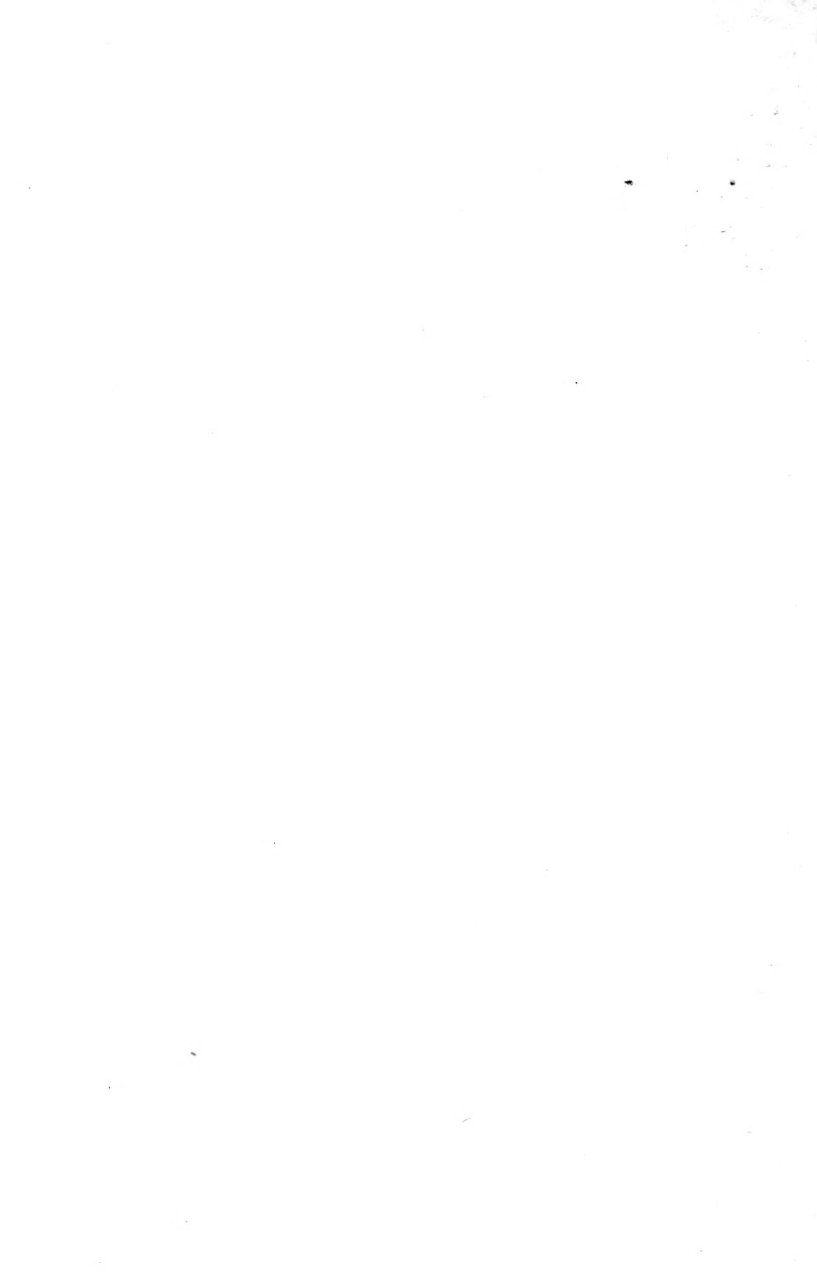
The words made him shiver as he thought of that pool under whose waters she would be lying now, if it had not been for Godfrey Fane—God bless him !—but he was careful to answer quietly, “ No, dear, you’ve turned the corner, and I mean to keep you.” And he kept his word.

Mr. Templeton was the one discontented man in the parish. He shook his head over the events which had happened, as well as over one which was to come. Two glaring criminals had got out of the world without prosecution or conviction, and he would dearly have liked to share in the first, and lead up to the second. And then Fane, the most deliberate fellow that ever lived, who

could have expected that he would have given himself away like the veriest school-boy, on the impulse of a sentimental moment!

THE END.







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